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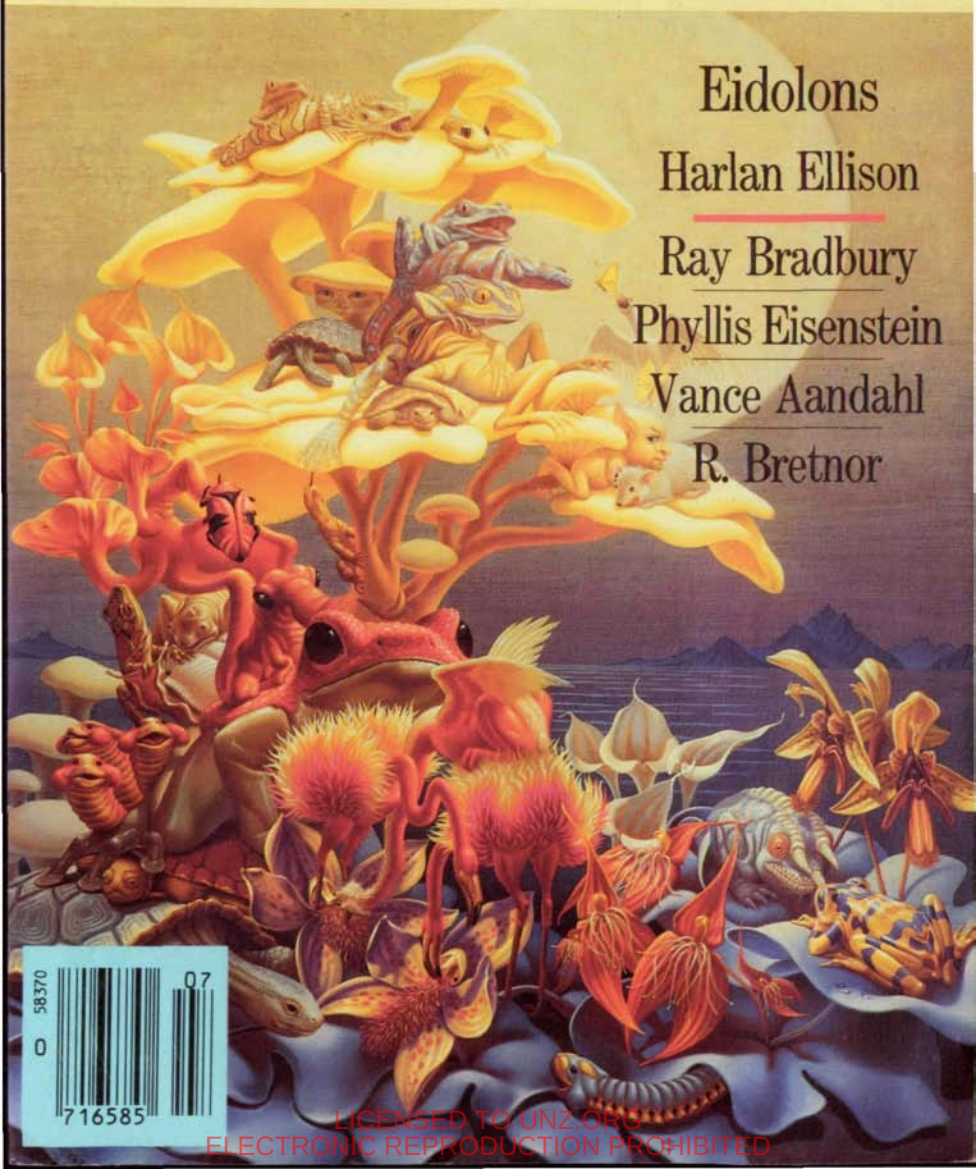

Eidolons

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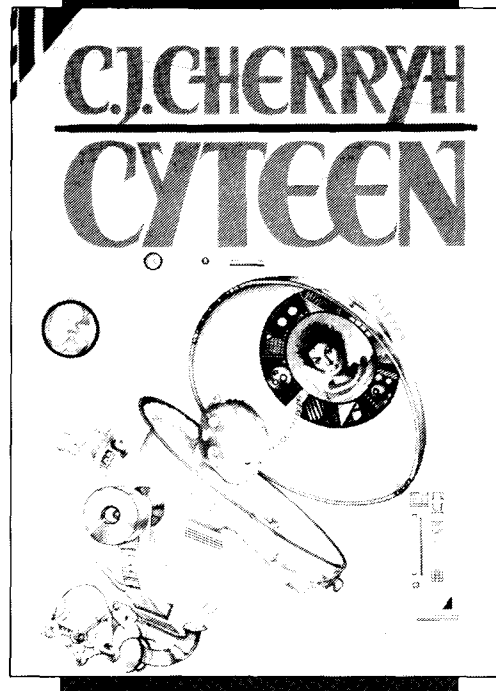

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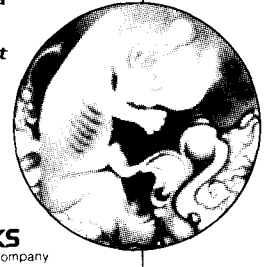

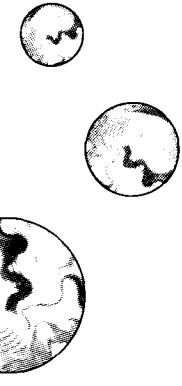

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A WORD FROM *Brian Thomsen*

Senior Editor of Questar Books
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The Twilight Zone Magazine

I started reading sf with the usuals (*Tom Swift, Space Cat,* and *The War of the Worlds*) and things used to be so simple. Science fiction took place in outer space and the aliens were the bad guys (or you could go back in time and the dinosaurs were the bad guys). Okay, I was naive.

I never could have imagined the books that I work with now. Science fiction beyond astronomy, dealing with biology, genetics and anthropology, authors like Octavia Butler dealing with what it means to be human on both a social and cellular level, or Richard Bowes redefining such concepts as "time," "telepathy" and "politics," and maybe even aliens who live among us and are in fact good guys (maybe even cops).

I was only a kid when I started reading sf, but somehow it still gets me excited. (When you see me around ask me about *Johnny Zed.*)

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NOVEL

BEYOND THE RED LORD'S REACH (1st of 3 parts)	101	**Phyllis Eisenstein**

SHORT STORIES

EIDOLONS	6	**Harlan Ellison**
ENTROPY	34	**Doug Hornig**
THE BIG WISH	47	**Martha Soukup**
AUNT'S FLIGHT	59	**Reginald Bretnor**
IN THE LIGHT OF THE HOLY HERB	70	**Vance Aandahl**
THE THING AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS	84	**Ray Bradbury**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	24	**Algis Budrys**
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	28	**Orson Scott Card**
SCIENCE: The Longest River	90	**Isaac Asimov**
F&SF COMPETITION	160	

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This strange and compelling story, which offers the parting gift of the man known as Vizenczy, is Harlan Ellison's first story in a year and his first here since "The Hour that Stretches," (October 1982). Followers of Mr. Ellison's film column will want to know that his criticism has been collected in a new book, HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING, to be published shortly by Underwood Miller.

Eidolons

By Harlan Ellison

EIDOLON: a phantom, an apparition, an image.

ANCIENT GEOGRAPHERS GAVE a mystic significance to that extremity of land, the borderland of the watery unknown at the southwestern tip of Europe. Marinus and Ptolemy knew it as *Promentorium Sacrum*, the sacred promontory. Beyond that beyondmost edge, lay nothing. Or rather, lay a place that was fearful and unknowable, a place in which it was always the twenty-fifth hour of the day, the thirtieth or thirty-first of February; a turbid ocean of lost islands where golden mushroom trees reached always toward the whispering face of the moon; where tricksy life had spawned beasts and beings more of satin and ash than of man and woman; dominion of dreams, to which the unwary might journey, but whence they could never return.

My name is Vizinczey, and my background is too remarkable to be detailed here. Suffice to note that before Mr. Brown died in my arms, I had

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distinguished myself principally with occupations and behavior most cultures reward by the attentions of the headsman and the *strappado*. Suffice to note that before Mr. Brown died in my arms, the most laudable engagement in my *vita* was as the manager and sole roustabout of an abattoir and ossuary in Li Shih-min. Suffice to note that there were entire continents I was forbidden to visit, and that even my closest acquaintances, the family of Sawney Beane, chose to avoid social intercourse with me.

I was a pariah. Whatever land in which I chose to abide, became a land of darkness. Until Mr. Brown died in my arms, I was a thing without passion, without kindness.

While in Sydney — Australia being one of the three remaining continents where hunting dogs would not be turned out to track me down — I inquired if there might be a shop where authentic military minatures, toy soldiers of the sort H. G. Wells treasured, could be purchased. A clerk in a bookstore recalled "a customer of mine in Special Orders mentioned something like that . . . a curious little man . . . a Mr. Brown."

I got onto him, through the clerk, and was sent round to see him at his home. The moment he opened the door and our eyes met, he was frightened of me. For the brief time we spent in each other's company, he never ceased, for a moment, to fear me. Ironically, he was one of the few ambulatory creatures on this planet that I meant no harm. Toy soldiers were my hobby, and I held in high esteem those who crafted, painted, amassed, or sold them. In truth, it might be said of the Vizinczey that was I in those times before Mr. Brown died in my arms, that my approbation for toy soldiers and their aficionados was the sole salutary aspect of my nature. So, you see, he had no reason to fear me. Quite the contrary. I mention this to establish, in spite of the police records and the warrants still in existence, seeking my apprehension, I had nothing whatever to do with the death of Mr. Brown.

He did not invite me in, though he stepped aside with a tremor and permitted entrance. Cognizant of his terror at my presence, I was surprised that he locked the door behind me. Then, looking back over his shoulder at me with mounting fear, he led me into an enormous central drawing room of his home, a room expanded to inordinate size by the leveling of walls that had formed adjoining areas. In that room, on every horizontal surface, Mr. Brown had positioned rank after rank of the most astonish-

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ing military miniatures I had ever seen.

Perfect in the most minute detail, painted so artfully that I could discern no brushstroke, in colors and tones and hues so accurate and lifelike that they seemed rather to have been created with pigmentations inherent; the battalions, cohorts, regiments, legions, phalanxes, brigades and squads of metal figurines blanketed in array without a single empty space; every inch of floor, tables, cabinets, shelves, window ledges, risers, showcases, and countless numbers of stacked display boxes.

Enthralled, I bent to study more closely the infinite range of fighting men. There were Norman knights and German Landsknecht, Japanese Samurai and Prussian dragoons, foot grenadiers of the French Imperial Guard and Spanish Conquistadors; U.S. 7th Cavalry troopers from the Indian Wars; Dutch musketeers and pikemen who marched with the army of Maurice of Nassau during the long war of independence fought by the Netherlands against the Spanish Habsburgs; Greek hoplites in bronze helmets and stiff cuirasses, cocked-hat riflemen of Morgan's Virginia Rifles who repulsed Burgoyne's troops with their deadly accurate Pennsylvania long-barrels; Eygptian chariot-spearmen and French Foreign Legionnaires; Zulu warriors from Shaka's legions and English longbowmen from Agincourt; Anzacs and Persian Immortals and Assyrian slingers; Cossacks and Saracen warriors in chain-mail and padded silk; 82nd Airborne paratroopers and Israeli jet pilots and Wehrmacht Panzer commanders and Russian infantrymen and Black Hussars of the 5th Regiment.

And as I drifted through a mist of wonder and pleasure, from array to array, one overriding observation dominated even my awe in the face of such artistic grandeur.

Each and every figure — to the last turbaned Cissian, trousered Scythian, wooden-helmeted Colchian or Pisidian with an oxhide shield — every one of them bore the most exquisite expression of terror and hopelessness. Faces twisted in anguish at the precise moment of death — or more terribly, the moment of *realization* of personal death — each soldier looked up at me with eyes just fogging with tears, with mouth half-open to emit a scream, with fingers reaching toward me in splay-fingered hope of last-minute reprieve.

These were not merely painted representations.

The faces were individual. I could see every follicle of beard, every drop of sweat, every frozen tic of agony. They seemed able to complete

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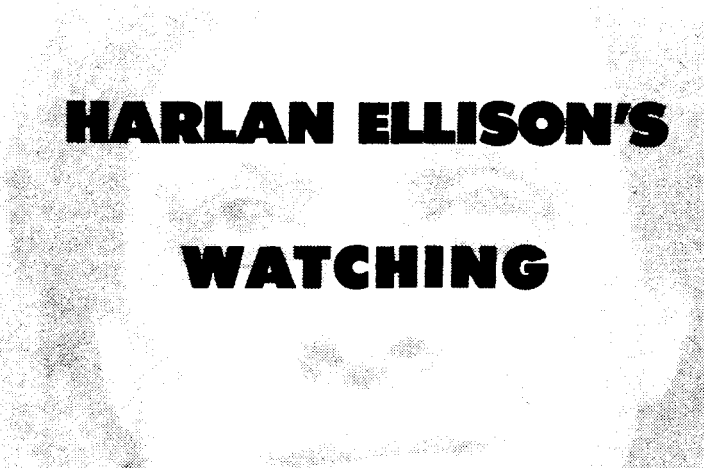

"Often more interesting than the movies he's writing about."
—Leonard Maltin

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the shriek of denial. They looked as if, should I blink, they would spring back to life and then fall dead as they were intended.

Mr. Brown had left narrow aisles of carpet among the vast armadas, and I had wandered deep into the shoe-top grassland of the drawing room, with the little man behind me, still locked up with fear but attendant at my back. Now I rose from examining a raiding party of Vietcong frozen in attitudes of agony as the breath of life stilled in them, and I turned to Mr. Brown with apparently such a look on my face that he blurted it out. I could not have stopped the confession had I so desired.

They were not metal figurines. They were flesh turned to pewter. Mr. Brown had no artistic skill save the one ability to snatch soldiers off the battlefields of time, to freeze them in metal, to miniaturize them, and to sell them. Each commando and halberdier captured in the field and reduced, at the moment of his death . . . realizing in that moment that Heaven or whatever Valhalla in which he believed, was to be denied him. An eternity of death in miniature.

"You are a greater ghoul than ever I could have aspired to become," I said.

His fright overcame him at that moment. Why, I do not know. I meant him no harm. Perhaps it was the summation of his existence, the knowledge of the monstrous hobby that had brought him an unspeakable pleasure through his long life, finally caught up with him. I do not know.

He spasmed suddenly as though struck at the base of his spine by a maul, and his eyes widened, and he collapsed toward me. To prevent the destruction of the exquisite figurines, I let him fall into my arms; and I carefully lowered him into the narrow aisle. Even so, his lifeless left leg decimated the ranks of the 13th-century Mongol warriors who had served Genghis Khan from the China Sea in the east to the gates of Austria in the west.

He lay face down, and I saw a drop of blood at the base of his neck. I bent closer as he struggled to turn his head to the side to speak, and saw the tiniest crossbow quarrel protruding from his rapidly discoloring flesh, just below the hairline.

He was trying to say something to me, and I knelt close to his mouth, my ear close to the exhalations of dying breath. And he lamented his life, for though he might well have been judged a monster by those who exist

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in conformity and abide within the mundane strictures of accepted ethical behavior, he was not a bad man. An obsessed man, certainly; but not a bad man. And to prove it, he told me haltingly of the *Promentorium Sacrum*, and of how he had found his way there, how he had struggled back. He told me of the lives and the wisdom and the wonders to be found there.

And he made one last feeble gesture to show me where the scroll was hidden. The scroll he had brought back, which had contained such knowledge as had permitted him to indulge his hobby. He made that last feeble gesture, urging me to find the scroll and to remove it from its hidden niche, and to use it for ends that would palliate his life's doings.

I tried to turn him over, to learn more, but he died in my arms. And I left him there in the narrow aisle among the Nazi Werewolves and Royal Welsh Fusiliers; and I threaded my way through the drawing room large enough to stage a cotillion; and I found the secret panel behind which he had secreted the scroll; and I removed it and saw the photograph he had taken in that beyond that lay beyond the beyondmost edge; the only image of that land that has ever existed. The whispering moon. The golden mushroom trees. The satin sea. The creatures that sit and ruminate there.

I took the scroll and went far away. Into the Outback, above Arkaroo Rock where the Dreamtime reigns. And I spent many years learning the wisdom contained in the scroll of Mr. Brown.

It would not be hyperbole to call it an epiphany.

For when I came back down, and re-entered the human stream, I was a different Vizinczey. I was recast in a different nature. All that I had been, all that I had done, all the blight I had left in my track . . . all of it was as if from someone else's debased life. I was now equipped and anxious to honor Mr. Brown's dying wish.

And that is how I have spent my time for the past several lifetimes. The scroll, in a minor footnote, affords the careful reader the key to immortality. Or as much immortality as one desires. So with this added benison of longevity, I have expended entire decades improving the condition of life for the creatures of this world that formerly I savaged and destroyed.

Now, due to circumstances I will not detail (there is no need to distress you with the specifics of vegetables and rust), the time of my passing is at

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hand. Vizinczey will be no more in a very short while. And all the good I have done will be the last good I can do. I will cease to be, and I will take the scroll with me. Please trust my judgment in this.

But for a very long time I have been your guardian angel. I have done you innumerable good turns. Yes, even you reading these words: I did you a good turn just last week. Think back and you will remember a random small miracle that made your existence prettier. That was I.

And as parting gift, I have extracted a brief number of the most important thoughts and skills from the scroll of the *Promentorium Sacrum*. They are the most potent runes from that astonishing document. So they will not burn, but rather will serve to warm, if properly adduced, if slowly deciphered and assimilated and understood. I have couched them in more contemporary, universal terms. I do this for your own good. They are not quite epigraphs, nor are they riddles; though set down in simple language, if pierced to the nidus, they will enrich and reify; they are potentially analeptic.

I present them to you now, because you will have to work your lives without me from this time forward. You are, as you were for millennia, alone once again. But you can do it. I present them to you because, from the moment Mr. Brown died in my arms, I have been unable to forget the look of human misery, endless despair, and hopelessness on the face of a Spartan soldier who lay on a carpet in a house in Sydney, Australia. This is for him, for all of them, and for you.

1.

IT'S THE dark of the sun. It's the hour in which worms sing madrigals, tea leaves tell their tales in languages we once used to converse with the trees, and all the winds of the world have returned to the great throat that gave them life. Messages come to us from the core of quiet. A friend now gone tries desperately to pass a message from the beyond, but the strength of ghosts is slight: all he can do is move dust-motes with great difficulty, arranging them with excruciating slowness to form words. The message comes together on the glossy jacket of a book casually dropped on a table more than a year ago. Laboriously laid, mote by mote, the message tells the friend still living that friendship must involve risk, that it is merely a word if it is never tested, that anyone can

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claim *friend* if there is no chance of cost. It is phrased simply. On the other side, the shade of the friend now departed waits and hopes. He fears the inevitable: his living friend despises disorder and dirt: what if he chances on the misplaced book while wearing his white gloves?

2.

DO THEY chill, the breezes that whisper of yesterday, the winds that come from a hidden valley near the top of the world? Do they bite, the shadowy thoughts that lie at the bottom of your heart during daylight hours, that swirl up like wood smoke in the night? Can you hear the memories of those who have gone before, calling to you when the weariness takes you, close on midnight? They are the winds, the thoughts, the voices of memory that prevail in the hour that lies between awareness and reverie. And on the other side of the world, hearing the same song, is your one true love, understanding no better than you, that those who cared and went away are trying to bring you together. Can you breach the world that keeps you apart?

3.

THIS IS an emergency bulletin. We've made a few necessary alterations in the status quo. For the next few weeks, there will be no madness; no imbecile beliefs; no paralogical, prelogical, or paleological thinking. No random cruelty. For the next few weeks, all the impaired mentalities will be frozen in stasis. No attempts to get you to believe that vast and cool intelligences come from space regularly in circular vehicles. No runaway tales of yetis, sasquatches, hairy shamblers of a lost species. No warnings that the cards, the stones, the running water, or the stars are against your best efforts. This is the time known in Indonesia as *djam karet* — the hour that stretches. For the next few weeks you can breathe freely and operate off these words by one who learned too late, by one who has gone away, who was called Camus: "It is not man who must be protected, but the possibilities within him." You have a few weeks without hindrance. Move quickly.

* * *

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4.

THE CASEMENT window blows open. The nightmare has eluded the guards. It's over the spiked wall and it's in here with you. The lights go out. The temperature drops sharply. The bones in your body sigh. You're all alone with it. Circling with your back to the wall. Hey, don't be a nasty little coward; face it and disembowel it. You've got time. You have *always* had time, but the fear slowed you, and you were overcome. But this is the hour that stretches . . . and you've got a chance. After all, it's only your conscience come to kill you. Stop shivering and put up your dukes. You might beat it this time, now that you know you have some breathing space. For in this special hour, anything that has ever happened will happen again. Except, this time, it's *your* turn to risk it all.

5.

IN THE cathedral at the bottom of the Maracot Deep, the carillon chimes for all the splendid thinkers you never got to be. The memories of great thoughts left unspoken rise from their watery tomb and ascend to the surface. The sea boils at their approach, and a siege of sea eagles gathers in the sky above the disturbance. Fishermen in small boats listen as they have never listened before, and all seems clear for the first time. These are warnings of storms made only by men. Tempests and sea-spouts, tsunamis and bleeding oceans the color of tragedy. For men's tongues have been stilled, and more great thoughts will die never having been uttered. Memories from the pit of the Deep rise to lament their brethren. Even now, even in the hour that stretches, the past silently cries out not to be forgotten. Are you listening, or must you be lost at sea forever?

6.

DID YOU have one of those days today, like a nail in the foot? Did the pterodactyl corpse dropped by the ghost of your mother from the spectral *Hindenburg* forever circling the Earth come smashing through the lid of your glass coffin? Did the New York strip steak you attacked at dinner suddenly show a mouth filled with

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needle-sharp teeth, and did it snap off the end of your fork, the last solid-gold fork from the set Anastasia pressed into your hands as they took her away to be shot? Is the slab under your apartment building moaning that it cannot stand the weight on its back a moment longer, and is the building stretching and creaking? Did a good friend betray you today, or did that good friend merely keep silent and fail to come to your aid? Are you holding the razor at your throat this very instant? Take heart, comfort is at hand. This is the hour that stretches. *Djam karet*. We are the cavalry. We're here. Put away the pills. We'll get you through this bloody night. Next time, it'll be your turn to help us.

7.

YOU WOKE in the night, last night, and the fiery, bony hand was enscribing mystic passes in the darkness of your bedroom. It carved out words in the air, flaming words, messages that required answers. One picture is worth a thousand words, the hand wrote. "Not in *this* life," you said to the dark and the fire. "Give me one picture that shows how I felt when they gassed my dog. I'll take less than a thousand words and make you weep for the last Neanderthal crouched at the cliff's edge at the moment he realized his kind were gone . . . show me your one picture. Commend to me the one picture that captures what it was like for me in the moment she said it was all over between us. Not in *this* life, Bonehand" So here we are, once again in the dark, with nothing between us in this hour that stretches but the words. Sweet words and harsh words and words that tumble over themselves to get born. We leave the pictures for the canvas of your mind. Seems only fair.

8.

RAIN FELL in a special pattern. I couldn't believe it was doing that. I ran to the other side of the house and looked out the window. The sun was shining there. I saw a hummingbird bury his stiletto beak in a peach on one of the trees, like a junkie who had turned himself into the needle. He sucked deeply and shadows flowed out of the unripe peach: a dreamy vapor that enveloped the bird, changing its features to something jubilantly malevolent. With juice

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glowing in one perfect drop at the end of its beak, it turned a yellow eye toward me as I pressed against the window. Go away, it said. I fell back and rushed to the other side of the house where rain fell in one place on the sunny street. In my soul I knew that not all inclement weather meant sorrow, that even the brightest day held dismay. I knew this all had meaning, but there was no one else in the world to whom I could go for interpretation. There were only dubious sources, and none knew more than I, not really. Isn't that the damnedest thing: there's never a good reference when you need one.

9.

THROUGH THE jaws of night we stormed, banners cracking against the icy wind, the vapor our beasts panted preceding us like smoke signals, warning the enemy that we looked forward to writing our names in the blood of the end of their lives. We rode for Art! For the singing soul of Creativity! Our cause was just, because it was the only cause worth dying for. All others were worth living for. They stood there on the black line of the horizon, their pikes angrily tilted toward us. *For Commerce,* they shouted with one voice. *For Commerce!* And we fell upon them, and the battle was high-wave traffic, with the sound of metal on metal, the sound of hooves on stone, the sound of bodies exploding. We battled all through the endless midnight till at last we could see nothing but hills and valleys of dead. And in the end, we lost. We always lost. And I, alone, am left to tell of that time. Only I, alone of all who went to war to measure the height of the dream, only I remain to speak to you here in the settling silence. Why do *you* feel diminished . . . you weren't there . . . it wasn't your war. Hell hath no fury like that of the uninvolved.

10.

HEAR THE music. Listen with all your might, and you needn't clap to keep Tinker Bell from going into a coma. The music will restore her rosy cheeks. Then seek out the source of the melody. Look long and look deep, and somewhere in the murmuring world you will find the storyteller, there under the cabbage leaves, singing to

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herself. Or is that a she? Perhaps it's a he. But whichever, or whatever,the poor thing is crippled. Can you see that now? The twisting, the bending, the awkward shape, the milky eye, the humped back, do you now make it out? But if you try to join in, to work a duet with wonder, the song ceases. When you startle the cricket, its symphony ceases. Art is not by committee, nor is it by wish fulfillment. It is that which is produced in the hour that stretches, the timeless time wherein *all* songs are sung. In a place devoid of electrical outlets. And if you try to grasp either the singer or the song, all you will hold is sparkling dust as fine as the butter the moth leaves on glass. How the bee flies, how the lights go on, how the enigma enriches and the explanation chills . . . how the music is made . . . are not things we were given to know. And only the fools who cannot hear the song ask that the rules be posted. Hear the music. And enjoy. But do not cry. Not everyone was intended to reach A above high C.

11.

AH, THERE were giants in the land in those days. There was a sweet-faced, honey-voiced girl named Barbara Wire, whom we called Nancy because no one had the heart to call her Barb Wire. She tossed a salamander into a window fan to see what would happen. There was Sofie, who had been bitten by *The Sun Also Rises* at a tender age, and who took it as her mission in life to permit crippled virginal boys the enjoyment of carnal knowlege of her every body part: harelips, lepers. paraplegics, albinos with pink eyes, aphasiacs, she welcomed them all to her bed. There was Marissa, who could put an entire unsegmented fried chicken in her mouth all at once, chew without opening her lips or dribbling, and who would then delicately spit out an intact skeleton, as dry and clean as the Gobi Desert. Perdita drew portraits. She would sit you down, and with her pad and charcoal, quickly capture the depth and specificity of your most serious flaws of honor, ethic, and conscience, so accurately that you would rip the drawing to pieces before anyone else could see the nature of your corruption. Jolanda: who stole cars and then reduced them to metal sculpture in demolition derbies, whose residence was in an abandoned car-crusher. Peggy: who never slept but told endlessly of her waking dreams of the things the birds told her they saw from on high. Naomi: who was white, passing for black, because she felt the need to

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shoulder some of the guilt of the world. Ah, there were giants in the land in those days. But I left the room, and closed the door behind me so that the hour that stretches would not leak out. And though I've tried portal after portal, I've never been able to find that room again. Perhaps I'm in the wrong house.

12.

I WOKE AT three in the morning, bored out of sleep by dreams of such paralyzing mediocrity that I could not lie there and suffer my own breathing. Naked, I padded through the silent house: I knew that terrain as my tongue knows my palate. There were rolls of ancient papyrus lying on the counter. I will replace them, high in a dark closet, I thought. Then I said it aloud . . . the house was silent, I could speak to the air. I took a tall stool and went to the closet, and climbed up and replaced the papyrus. Then I saw it. A web. Dark and billowing in the corner of the ceiling, not silvery but ashy. Something I could not bear to see in my home. It threatened me. I climbed down, moved through the utter darkness, and struggled with the implements in the broom closet, found the feather duster, and hurried back. Then I killed the foaming web and left the closet. Clean the feather duster, I thought. In the backyard I moved to the wall, and shook it out. Then, as I returned, incredible pain assaulted me. The cactus pup with its cool, long spikes had embedded itself in the ball of my naked right foot. My testicles shrank and my eyes watered. I took an involuntary step, and the spines drove deeper. I reached down to remove the agony, and a spike embedded itself in my thumb. I shouted. I hurt. Limping, I got to the kitchen. In the light of the kitchen, I tried to pinch out the spines. They were barbed. They came away with bits of flesh attached. The poison was already spreading. I hurt very much. I hobbled to the bathroom to put antiseptic or the Waters of Lethe on the wounds. They bled freely. I salved myself, and returned to the bed, hating my wife who slept unknowing; I hated my friend who lay dreaming in another part of the house. I hated the world for placing random pain in my innocent path. I lay down and hated all natural order for a brief time. Then I fell asleep. Relieved. Boredom had been killed with the billowing web. Somehow, the universe always provides.

* * *

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13.

LIKE ALL men, my father was a contradiction in terms. Not more than two or three years after the Great Depression, when my family was still returning pop bottles for the few cents deposit, and saving those pennies in a quart milk bottle, my father did one of the kindest things I've ever known: he hired a man as an assistant in his little store; an assistant he didn't really need and couldn't afford. He hired the man because he had three children and couldn't find a job. Yet not more than a week later, as we locked up the stationary shop late on a Saturday night, and began to walk down the street to the diner where we would have our hot roast beef sandwiches and french fries, with extra country gravy for dipping the fries, another man approached us on the street and asked for twenty-five cents to buy a bowl of soup. And my father snarled, "No! Get away from us!" I was more startled at that moment than I had ever been — or ever *would* be, as it turned out, for my father died not much later that year — more startled than by anything my father had ever said or done. If I had known the word at that age — I was only twelve — I would have realized that I was *dumbfounded.* My gentle father, who never raised his voice to me or to anyone else, who was unfailingly kind and polite even to the rudest customer, who has forever been a model of compassion for me, *my father* had grown icy and stony in that exchange with an innocent stranger. "Dad," I asked him, as we walked away from the lonely man, "how come you didn't give that fella a quarter for some soup?" He looked down at me, as if through a crack in the door of a room always kept locked, and he said, "He won't buy a bowl of soup. He'll only buy more liquor." Because my father never lied to me, and because I knew it was important for him always to tell me the truth, I didn't ask anything more about it. But I never forgot that evening; and it is an incident I can never fit into the film strip of loving memories I run and rerun starring my father. Somehow I feel, without understanding, that it was the most important moment of human frailty and compassion in the twelve years through which I was permitted to adore my father. And I wonder when I will grow wise enough to understand the wisdom of my father.

Thus, my gift. There were six more selections from the scroll of the *Promentorium Sacrum,* but once having entered them here, I realized

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they would cause more harm than good. Tell me truly: Would you really want the power to bend others to your will, or the ability to travel at will in an instant to anyplace in the world, or the facility for reading the future in mirrors? No, I thought not. It is gratifying to see that just the wisdom imparted here has sobered you to that extent.

And what would you do with the knowledge of shaping, the talent for sending, the capturing of rainbows? You already possess such powers and abilities as the world has never known. Now that I've left you the time to master what you already know, you should have no sorrow at being denied these others. Be content.

Now I take my leave. Passage of an instant sort has been arranged. Vizinczey, the I that I became, goes finally on the journey previously denied. Until I had fulfilled the dying request of Mr. Brown, I felt it was unfair of me to indulge myself. But now I go to the sacred promontory; to return the scroll; to sit at the base of the golden mushroom trees and confabulate with astonishing creatures. Perhaps I will take a camera, and perhaps I will endeaver to send back a snap or two, but that is unlikely.

I go contentedly, for all my youthful crimes, having left this a prettier venue than I found it.

And finally, for those of you who always wash behind your ears because, as children, you heeded the admonition "go wash behind your ears," seeing motion pictures of children being examined by their parents before being permitted to go to the dinner table, remembering the panels in comic strips in which children were being told, "Go back and wash behind your ears," who always wondered why that was important — after all, your ears fit fairly close to your head — who used to wonder what one could possibly have behind one's ears — great masses of mud, dangerous colonies of germs, could vegetation actually take root there, what are we talking about and why such obsessive attention to something so silly! — for those of you who were trusting enough to wash behind your ears, and still do . . . for those of you who know the urgency of tying your shoelaces tightly . . . who have no fear of vegetables or rust . . . I answer the question you raise about the fate of those tiny metal figurines left in eternal anguish on the floor of Mr. Brown's drawing room. I answer the question in this way:

There was a man standing behind you yesterday in the checkout line at the grocery store. You casually noticed that he was buying the most unusual combinations of exotic foods. When you dropped the package of

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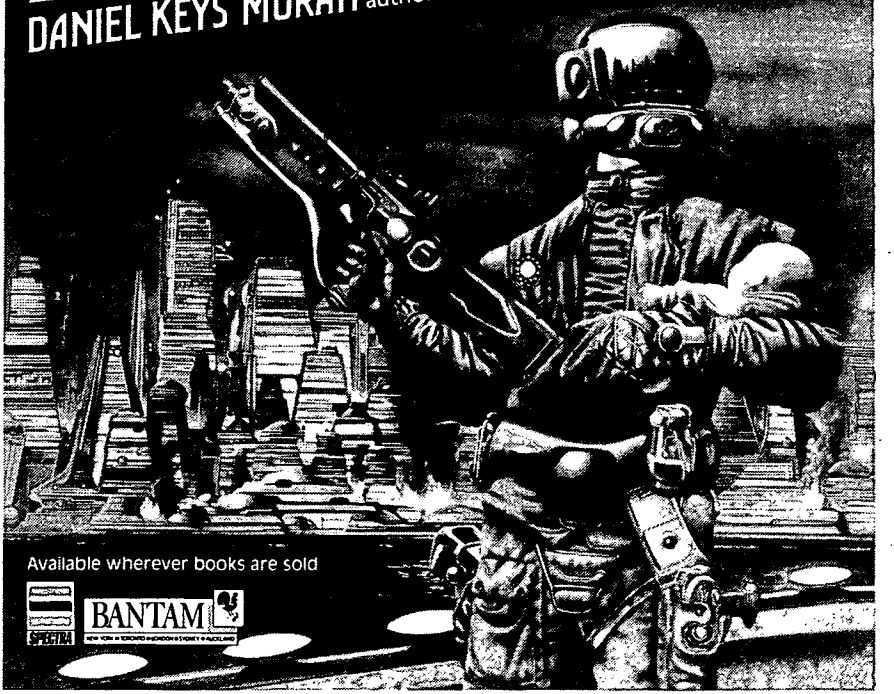

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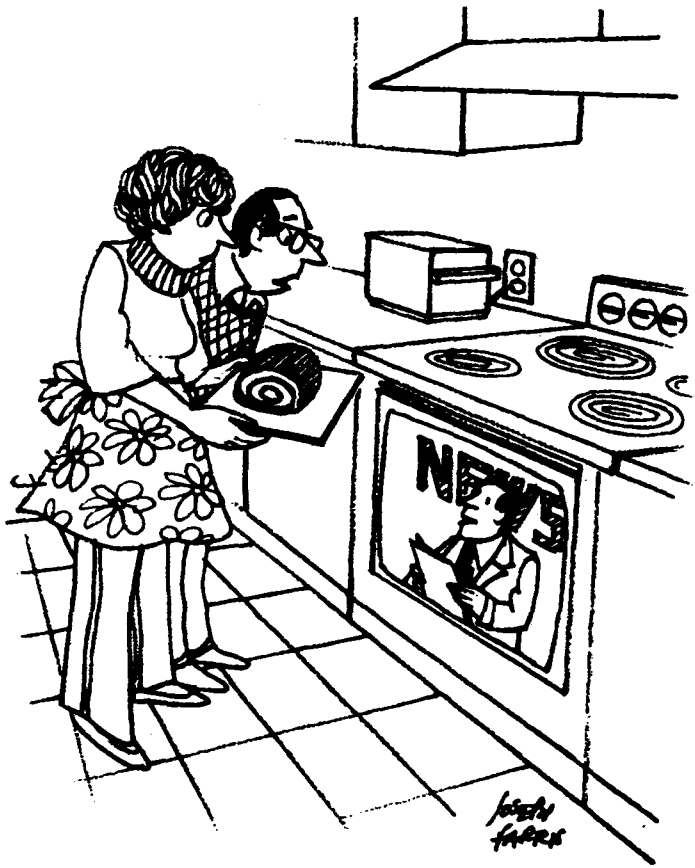
frozen peas, and he stooped to retrieve it for you, you noticed that he had a regal, almost one might say *militaristic*, bearing. He clicked his heels as he proffered the peas, and when you thanked him, he spoke with a peculiar accent.

Trust me in this: not even if you were Professor Henry Higgins could you place the point of origin of that accent.

Dedicated to the memory of Mike Hodel



"Maybe it's one of those superstations."

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Last Ship, William Brinkley
Viking, $19.95

THERE ARE some stories we just can't let go of. They recur and recur in human literature, their endless round of reincarnations laying waste to any notion that fiction is perfectible. Rather, fiction is adaptable. It may be there are never going to be any more stories than we have now. It may be this state was actually achieved so long ago no one can remember. It appears that in each generation there will be the most successful adaptations of the old stories, and then the nearly as successful ... however many rings as can be supported by the impact with which the stone hit the water this particular time. All that varies is the energy imparted to each of the possible stories, so that we get relative — but transient, remember — importances.*

**What I appear to be saying is that each generation shakes a cup containing a finite number of bits, and then attempts to understand "literary progress" based on this throw of the dice.*

Consider the story set in the afterglow of civilization.

What the Nicholls *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* classifies as the "Disaster" story has been around since, the Encyclopedia says, the Gilgamesh epic. I wouldn't dispute that; *everything* goes back to the Gilgamesh epic, and if we had examples of any earlier substantial work, it would all go back to *that*. What it really goes back to is something inside the human head, which goes back to that evocative little line of footprints enlayered in the soil-strata of the African savannah. If I were a Jungian, I would speculate that it goes back to the earliest grassfire ever experienced by an intelligence in our line of descent.

But one has to draw the line somewhere. Supposing that the work descended from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley represents "our" literature, then the story of the little band of escapees from universal doom, poised on the cusp of extinction, has been with us for a time long enough to be eternal. Its prototype, I would propose, was Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of The*

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Plague Year, since we can guess that *Robinson Crusoe* may have been the major precursor of the *Frankenstein* and thus that Wollstonecraft had a predilection for Defoe. That peculiar genius had been dead a century, but we get *Plague Year* in full novelistic flower for the first time in Wollstonecraft's *The Last Man*. Evolving thereafter, this story now may owe something to some of the works of H.G. Wells, recalls M.P. Shiel's turn-of-the-century *The Purple Cloud*, owes a lot to Jack London's WWI "The Scarlet Plague," and began to proliferate as the world began to decide World War II was coming.

With such entries as Herbert Best's *The Twenty-Fifth Hour* and L. Ron Hubbard's *Final Blackout*, it shifted from plague to war as the proximate cause of the enabling disaster, and then the invention of nuclear warfare gave that particular sub-subgenre a big boost. Although it's interesting that George R. Stewart's plague-enabled magnum opus, *Earth Abides*, dates from 1949, and John Christopher's *No Blade of Grass* appeared in 1956, the postwar book everyone in and out of SF remembers is Nevil Shute's blockbuster *On The Beach*. But in many ways it's often the same story, no matter what excuse it cites in any given case. What is this attraction which like a sore tooth draws people to write and read this story repeatedly, even though it's often the same story with the same cast? And what, if you will run your eye along that list again, causes it to be even more popular with "mainstream" authors than it is with those who customarily publish in "our" media?

The occasion for all this thought is the appearance of William Brinkley's post-atomiggedon *The Last Ship*, which at this writing is confidently expected by industry seers to mount the best-seller lists like a ballistic missile.*

The Last Ship, an industry pick for mass readership, supplies the good old story once again. Question is, how well? Next question: What

**I don't know who all those people are. But month after month Henry Kisor, Book Review Editor of the Chicago* Sun-Times, *sends me an advance galley or two to write up for my "Pop Lit" column in that paper. And month after month those books turn up on the B-S list in the four or five position* on the date of official publication, *and thereafter squirt straight up to Number 1. Also, these books are almost always so dreadfully written as to constitute a form of publishing product completely different from anything you or I would recognize as a novel. So there does appear to be a way to predict best-sellerdom a lot of the time, and this seems to correlate with truly appalling technical inexpertise. I don't know what this tells you. I don't even know what it tells me, but I think I am beginning to get the hint.*

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do you mean by "well" in this context?

A lot of the good and reliable is in here: the steadfast, reasonable hero attempting to ensure the continuance of the human race after the wave of megadeath; the unexpected difficulties posed by the unreasonable subordinate; the possibly cruel woman with her hidden agenda; the lurking enemy who might in the end be made reasonable so that resources can be joined for the common good. But what is not here is either the happy ending, which almost always has to be blatantly contrived, or *On The Beach's* tragic, cadenced ultimate wink-out. So if wellness in this sort of book is gauged by the extent to which it contains all the popular ingredients, the Brinkley ultimately fails to deliver.

If it's raising and attempting to deal with the deeper philosophical questions, the Brinkley ultimately fails there, too. But in a curious, broken-kneed way, it often appears to be stumbling home. It is a book SF readers will find satisfying meat in, because unlike On *The Beach*, which is a much more successful read, Brinkley's book attempts to tackle things like whether humanity does have an urge to self-destruction that will overcome all rationality and all the impulses of beauty and truth, whether the repository of whatever saving graces there are is in women, and what — in depth — is the optimum survival attitude. This is trying to be an important book.

"Important": makes you think. "Curious way"; you can't tell what the author thought or intends you to think.

Both of the above can be ascribed largely to Brinkley's style in this first-person novel, ostensibly the journal of the essentially nameless captain of the guided-missile destroyer *Nathan James*, which appears to be the sole surviving U.S. naval vessel. He writes prose as if C.S. Forester's conscience-tormented nineteenth-century naval hero, Horatio Hornblower, had very recently gotten hold of a word-processor: "The choice as to direction the ship would take for the first time forcing those other competing considerations up into realms of consciousness, terrible and impermissible thoughts not fair to thrust upon any man, least of all upon a ship's captain who did not want them, a mere mortal, who had crushing in upon him enough other insistences to test all his capabilities, this being the last ever to be one of them."

There are many sentences(?) like that in *The Last Ship*, and they are either simply ludicrous or—*or*—a very careful, conscious stylization

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by a writer who can do the trick of being a very different first person from the "I" whose writing style is part of his author's characterization of him.

In the one possibility, we have someone so fascinated by his insert mode that he keeps adding words to a thought until it staggers to about where it was aimed. The likelier analysis is that Brinkley is trying something very ambitious ... and is very nearly getting there. The scenes with the "survivors" on the beaches of Italy, and the exploration of the drifting French yacht with its rotting passengers, make striking use of transitions into the literary out of the literal before it becomes melodramatically graphic. They are clear evidence of a novelist at work, as distinguished from someone with his eye on the screenplay.

With an honest, earnest persistence, Brinkley attempts to deal with what woman wants. Some of the crew of the *Nathan James* are female, including several important ratings and a key officer. This has interesting novelistic possibilities, because a female sailor capable of getting combat-duty assignment is, as Brinkley points out, an extraordinarily motivated high-level performer; this near-future U.S. Navy is only in the beginning years of accepting women on combat crews, so the women Brinkley isolates into his small community of survivors can be expected to be superior in some way to any man with the same rank and training.*

In general, Brinkley spends quite a bit of time on scenes and ruminations related to matters female, and these appear to be distinguished in his mind from matters procreative. Although the need to make babies is something that obviously brings the whole question to the fore, his approach indicates a far deeper interest than just managing his colony of survivors in such a way that the score of females can accomodate to the hundred males in a manner consistant with Naval Regulations, were Navy Regs ever to require a section dealing with such a situation. That much is what Hornblower would have dealt with; Brinkley definitely wants to do more, about *something*. What, I couldn't decide; but it had me thinking.

There are other clues that Brinkley, is, indeed, working on several

**At one point, startlingly, this leads to a brief incursion of scenes which only a generation ago would have gotten this book banned in Gomorrah. I can't tell whether this interpolation (!) was intended by Brinkley the best-seller candidate or Brinkley the novelist; on shaky ground, I think Brinkley was attempting to do something novelistic with this material, but God knows what.*

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levels. It's clear the captain never realizes that at a crucial moment the even more nameless captain of the Soviet submarine *Pushkin* has fired a torpedo, but Brinkley does, and hopes the reader will realize too. What's not clear — and I think this is intended, as well — is whether the Russian was motivated by blind anger, cold tactical planning, or a revealingly swift impulse of mercy. It's important to decide that because it would tell us who the better sort of captain is.

That's typical of the way in which Brinkley has overextended himself. It's worthy to write a book that attempts to deal with the question of which wisdoms are preferable and to what extent the women in this story were wise; it's then particularly bad to be so open-ended the reader is being told on the one hand the situation is this and on the other it's that.

Brinkley is best known for his first book, *Don't Go Near the Water*, a comic Navy novel done after World II. The author of *The Last Ship* is a much evolved Brinkley. Besides *On The Beach* and the Lord Hornblower series, major obvious contributions to this novel come from the work of Joseph Conrad and from Herman Melville, who wrote not only *Moby Dick* but several tortuous South Sea novels that I think impressed Brinkley in not quite the most useful way.

A work often worth the reader's effort, but not consistently so, *The Last Ship* ends with the promise of a sequel. That's one way to get out of writing an ending for this book, but that is, Captain, very close to dereliction of self-imposed duty.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Starfire, Paul Preuss, (TOR, Cloth, 310 pp, $17.95)

THE PLOT sounds like a standard *Analog* story of hardware in crisis: A bunch of astronauts finally get launched, despite bureaucratic meddling, on the first operational voyage of a reusable interplanetary shuttle, the *Starfire*. Their first objective is to visit an anomalous asteroid. They are just leaving when a solar flare, combined with some computer program foul-ups, doom them to destruction — unless they can, with tools at hand,

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ROBERT ADAMS

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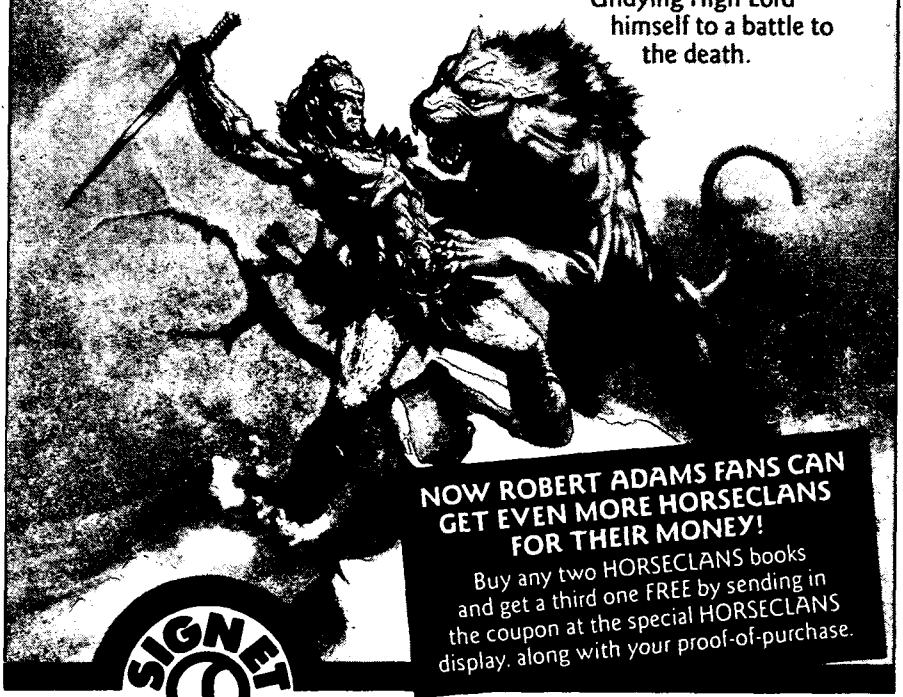

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SIGNET SCIENCE FICTION

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find a way to get around the sun and hurl themselves back toward Earth without burning up or running out of fuel.

I usually sum up such a plot this way: A mixed crew with a really neat new machine gets into a really dangerous situation and by trying really hard and being really brave and saying "I think I can, I think I can," they just *barely* make it.

The difference here is that Paul Preuss is writing the story. The result is that the writing is clear and energetic, the science is believable and never dull, and, above all, the characters are real.

They aren't just individually real — these characters are real *together*. Preuss understands that human beings are not integers, existing in isolation; instead we are the sums, quotients, products, and roots of ever-shifting equations. When you think you have a character pegged, that's the moment Preuss will surprise you, will show that the character was more — or less, or other — than you supposed.

A couple of years ago, Preuss's *Human Error* was a marvelous extrapolation on bio-engineering. With *Starfire*, he has taken hold of a moribund sci-fi cliche and breathed new life into it. True, there were moments where the novel felt old-fashioned and heavy-handed, times when the special effects department tried a little too hard to dazzle the reader, but the fact remains that Preuss has done the impossible — he has written a terrific novel about the near future of the American space program.

He has also done something more important than that. Preuss has dared to tell a story of true heroism, of human beings at their noblest. There is a brief moment at the climax of the book where one character has made a decision to die in order to save the others — and lies about it, so no one can argue against the decision. Everyone knows it's a lie, but in silence they all accept the sacrifice, knowing that without it none of them would get home.

Instead of wallowing in guilt or angst or sentimentality, Preuss presents us with unadorned love and nobility and asks that we admire it, honor it, *believe* in it — but also take it for granted as just one more natural but irrational outcome of the human equation.

This is not an unforgettable classic — there is too much familiar ground here for that. But *Starfire* is a true story, true in the way that only the best fiction *can* be true, and I heartily recommend it.

The Tommyknockers, Stephen King (Putnam, Cloth, 558 pp, $19.95).

* * *

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I regularly make myself obnoxious in gatherings of literature professors by pointing out that a hundred years from now, when people wish to read the quintessential literature of our times, the fiction that defined and recorded the late twentieth century, the names of Bellow, Updike, Barthelme, Didion, and Beattie will all have to struggle for sunlight under the sprawling shadow of Stephen King. Some literateurs, hearing this, have gagged at the thought, but none who were sober have seriously tried to disagree. What Dickens was in his time, and Twain in his, King is to our time — and I applaud it. He has seen with a true eye, and written with a clear and honest voice, and done it with such force that America — or at least that portion of America that reads — has sat up and paid attention. Has *cared* in a way that neither Harold Robbins nor Saul Bellow has ever made them care.

Furthermore, I believe that King's best work has been, not his horror stories, but his science fiction. While *The Stand* is ultimately religious fiction, its near-future setting and the bio-engineering source of the world-wrecking plague that begins the book put it plainly within our genre. And *The Dead Zone*, so far his finest novel, belongs to that wide current within sci-fi of stories about precognition and trying to change the future.

Nevertheless, not even Dickens or Twain produced great work every time. Great and prolific writers all have experiments that fail — Faulkner certainly did, though *his* failures are generally required reading in college English classes, while Twain's miserable *Tom Sawyer, Detective* is mercifully left to languish in well-deserved obscurity.

Such, I hope, will be the fate of *The Tommyknockers*. The tale is a weary one: A buried flying saucer is uncovered in the village of Haven, Maine, and eventually possesses the souls of its inhabitants, directing them to carry out its own purposes. A handful of people remain somewhat independent and finally manage to end the town's enthrallment.

It's a measure of King's talent that the hoary plot still makes quite a readable book, and the characters are interesting and well-drawn. but I couldn't shake off the feeling that this was King writing in his sleep. This was King doing what he already does so well that he can do it without even really caring much about the story.

Well, for this reader at least, he's wrong. There was something missing from this book. Passion. Belief. Maybe King actually felt both as he wrote the book, but this time it never got from the keyboard to the thirty-five

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sixteen-page signatures that make up this heavy, but lightweight, book.

Faces,Leigh Kennedy (Atlantic Monthly Press, cloth, 152 pp, $15.95).

Leigh Kennedy's first novel, *The Journal of Nicholas the American*, was one of the best novels of 1986. It was a book about an empath. But I couldn't help thinking that it was also a book *by* an empath. I remember thinking as I read it, How did she learn to tell about this? How did she know how it feels?

Now her publisher has paid her the rich compliment of publishing a collection of her short stories, even though, as everyone knows, short story collections don't sell.

Well, let's make an exception in this case, shall we? Kennedy tells stories on the very fringes of science fiction, in that speculative area that never uses gadgets, just carries present reality a little farther, explores present love and loss and pain and makes you live inside someone else's soul for a brief while.

Three of the stories in *Faces* appeared in *Asimov's* back in 1983; others were in a fanzine, a horror anthology, and a literary magazine. But some are published here for the first time.

"The Fisherman" is about a man who finds the body of a murdered child in a lake. Does her ghost haunt him? Is there a monster? No, Kennedy feels no need to juice the story up with fantasy. There's horror enough in what finding the girl means to him. No one ever knows who she was. But he knows who she could have been, if only he'd been willing to have children when his wife so badly wanted to. I didn't need a ghost to feel haunted.

"Petit Mal" is an exquisite tale of a boy who begins having short seizures that cut out brief sections of events around him, so he views the rest of the world in time-lapse, days seeming to pass in hours, his family fading around him. Painful as it is to see the cost of this intermittent short-circuit in his brain, anguish comes only when his "time travel" finally ends.

This year, Pat Murphy's "Rachel in Love," the story of a girl's mind put into the body of an ape, will certainly win the Hugo and Nebula. But I urge you also to read Leigh Kennedy's story "Her Furry Face," which is the dark side of that bright and hopeful coin — the story of a man who, unable to deal with people, tries to treat his Pinocchio, a sentient orangutan named Annie, as a woman. Kennedy somehow knows how this man feels when he realizes that he has committed an unforgiveable sin. Some stories are almost too true to bear.

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Usually you'll hear me ranting about how we need more sense of wonder in science fiction. Well, I'm right. But Leigh Kennedy's *Faces* reminded me of how vital it also is to reach for her exquisite sense of truth.

A Different Flesh, Harry Turtledove (Congdon & Weed, Isaac Asimov Presents, cloth, $16.95).

When Columbus came to the New World, he found, not "Indians," but primitive ape-men that were soon dubbed "sims." Unable to learn human speech or conceptualize at a human level, the sims could still learn to make tools, could still be trained to do reliable work. Could still, in other words, be made slaves.

Harry Turtledove's alternate American history *A Different Flesh* is a series of compelling stories about each stage in the development of human-sim relations. Turtledove pastiches several traditional story forms, from Indian-capture tales to Samuel Pepy's diary. More important, though, he shows in clear relief the struggle for human beings to recognize kinship with a sentient but inferior species.

In some ways, the existence of sims helps humans treat each other better — with sims around for contrast, it's easier for 19th-century Americans to recognize that blacks are human, for instance. But serious questions are raised in the final story, "Freedom," when 1980s sims are deliberately infected with AIDS, leading to the development of a drug that controls but does not cure the disease.

I keenly felt the anguish of the sims-rights activists who kidnap an AIDS-infected sim, only to realize that it is impossible for them to give him true freedom. This was made all the more powerful by Turtledove's decision to write several passages from the sim's point of view. It's tough to write from a subhuman character's point of view without sentimentalizing and anthropomorphizing until the true differences between species are erased.

Turtledove never falls into that trap, not even in the story of Henry Quick, a trapper in the Rocky Mountains. When his leg is broken in a struggle with a bear, his life is saved by a tribe of sims, leading through several natural steps to his becoming a "squawman." Even though we join Quick in feeling real affection for the sim female who becomes his mate, Turtledove never once even hints that the sims have any hope of becoming human.

His message is more difficult than that. He insists that, even knowing that the sims will never be fully human, they must be allowed to keep their natural dignity; that their

(to page 46)

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Since his last appearance in F & SF, *Doug Hornig has published two novels with Mysterious Press:* The Dark Side *(1986) and* Waterman *(1987). With this tale, he reminds us that while we fill our lives with small worries, some people — namely Professor Harold Adamson — take on the really big worries such as . . . "Entropy."*

Entropy

By Doug Hornig

PROFESSOR HAROLD ADAMSON was a slight, bespectacled man, with a curvature of the spine that thrust his shoulders forward when he walked. There were those among his students who were amused by his appearance. They called him The Grasshopper. Behind his back, of course, never to his pinched face. No one would have had the nerve.

The Grasshopper had a Ph.D. and a BMW. He brought in more grant money than anyone else in the economics department. He had been prominently mentioned for a Nobel on two different occasions, but had as yet failed to receive one. The university was very proud of him nonetheless. No other faculty member had been mentioned for a Nobel. As a token of its esteem, the university supplemented Harold Adamson's income with some irregular but substantial under-the-table payments. The professor was not unlike a prize football recruit, except that he never had to run off-tackle.

Harold spent his money on French wine, high-fidelity sound-repro-

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duction equipment, redheaded coeds between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, and Chinese ball-within-a-ball ivory carvings. Not necessarily in that order. He couldn't possibly spend as much as he earned, and he didn't know what to do with the rest. Occasionally, he invested in orange-juice or pork-belly futures, but he was so often correct that that only compounded the problem. He opened a Swiss bank account, although he'd never been to Europe and hated snow.

On weekends he rarely left his condominium. The condo had cost nearly a hundred thousand dollars and stood with its clones on a hill overlooking the academic village. Its interior had been done by a myopic professional decorator named Martin Spark. It resembled a simple organic molecule such as fructose.

Harold's only live-in companion was his cat, a spayed Persian called Volcker. Neither Harold nor Volcker spent a lot of time admiring the view outside the condo. Instead, they would watch weekend sports together — basketball games and track meets and superstar competitions — on the forty-inch television. It was even better than being there. Harold's infrequent visitors all agreed. During breaks in the action, Volcker would try to eat her master's Argyle socks.

Professor Adamson was responsible for one senior seminar per semester. It was the least favorite among his classes because it most reminded him of the passage of time. If there was a redhead in the group, she would likely be on the downhill side of twenty-two, or close to it.

Weather permitting, the last seminar in the spring was traditionally held outdoors, at a time when the flowering dogwoods were just losing their flowers. The Grasshopper's final lecture was always the same:

"What you have studied this year," he said, "is economic theory. And that is all they are. Theories. That is what economics is all about. We propound our theories, and we make our predictions. In the short run, we even have our successes. Less frequently than not. One theory is in the ascendant today; another will replace it tomorrow.

"The key is that we are always talking about the short run. The short run is today and tomorrow, my lifetime and yours, this century and the next and the one after that.

"It's all the short run, boys and girls, and we pretend that it's important, that our theories of the moment are the last word, that our fancy prizes connote *something* of value. And why do we do all this? Because we do

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not want to admit that our pseudoscience of economics, for all its clever theories, has but one real *law*. The single certainty that applies to the *long* run. The one that was birthed by physics and that we now realize applies equally well to everything else.

"Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics, my young friends."

Professor Adamson leaned forward even more than his back normally bowed him. He crossed his forearms, as if he were about to start producing insect music.

"We are all familiar with this law, are we not?"

There was no response. Some of the students sat with rapt, vacant expressions. Others played with the spring grass and the fallen dogwood flowers. One couple had eyes only for each other.

"All right," Harold Adamson said, "does *anyone* know what I'm talking about?"

A blonde girl raised her hand, as did one of the boys. Harold didn't like blondes. Too shallow, he'd found. He didn't like brunettes either. Too intellectual. Black girls were too sensitive; Hispanics too volatile; Asians too devious. He'd settled on redheads. They seemed able to temper their passion with just the proper measure of deference.

Even though his criteria were thus restricted, and even though there was the inevitable age differential, and even though he did lack physical appeal in any usual sense, the professor seldom lacked as much companionship as he could tolerate. He had, after all, been mentioned for the Nobel. Twice. And there are always those who believe that this kind of fortune can be acquired by association.

Harold regarded the inert faces before him, as well as the more animated ones that belonged to the two students who continued to hold their hands up. The boy and the blonde girl. Blondes he didn't care for, of course, but boys he didn't like any of. So he motioned to the girl.

"A closed thermodynamic system eventually runs downs," the girl said. *You grasshopper,* she added to herself.

"And this is called?" Adamson asked.

"Entropy," the girl said.

"Just so. Entropy. The universal law. Now apply it, if you will, to economics." No one jumped to make the application, so the professor continued. "All that we do, all that we project, all that we *hope for,* is based upon the principle of increase. And yet, in our universe, there in only one

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thing that steadily increases. Entropy. Who can put it in the simplest way?"

"If there is no gasoline in your car," the blonde girl said, "it won't do anything."

Perhaps she has more substance than expected, The Grasshopper thought. But then, she is bound to be shallow in her personal relationships.

"Correct," Professor Adamson said. "Each time you drive anywhere, you are reminded of the Second Law. And so with your microwave and your VCR. We generate electricity by depleting the world's supply of petroleum. When it is gone, there is a hundred times as much coal, we are told. And then there is nuclear power. A little uranium goes such a long way. When that's gone, hydrogen fusion. And solar energy. Clean, free, and limitless. Blah, blah, blah. Et cetera, et cetera.

"But all the while, entropy is relentlessly punching tickets. All economics, like civilization, like life itself, is based on the availability of energy. And in the end, energy is finite. It is consumed, then it is gone. In a closed thermodynamic system, such as our universe, it cannot reappear. There *is* no free lunch."

Harold leaned forward again. He had the attention of his audience, more or less. The spring breeze ruffled crisp young heads of hair, none of them red. He spread his arms as if in expectation of an embrace.

"I will give you a nice image to take with you from this course," he said. He lifted one hand and waved it in the air. At the same time he shuffled his feet unenthusiastically.

"Picture your economics professor," he said. "The Nobel Prize is here in his raised hand. Now picture him dancing with his prize on a lifeless earth as it wobbles through eternity around a cold and perpetually darkened sun.

"That is what this ugly law does to economics, and every other damn thing you care to name."

He gave them a grin most evil.

"And so," he said, "enjoy it while you can, *if* you can. Class dismissed. Semester terminated."

The students dispersed. Many of them headed for the Strip, a section of town that catered to the predictable needs of collegiate youth. There was in particular a pub called The Black Hole. It featured soft lighting, a real

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log-eating fireplace, and Bass ale on tap. It was a favorite haunt of those who liked to mix their afternoon beer with speculations about the meaning of life. Transitory physical liaisons were often begun or ended at The Black Hole.

That night, as he did after each year-ending entropy lecture, Harold Adamson went home and drank freely of his best French wine. He consumed nearly three bottles before losing consciousness during David Letterman. A portion of the final bottle spilled on the parquet floor. It was lapped up by Volcker, who had cultivated a taste for certain French varietals. She, too, passed out, but not until she'd tried to eat Eddie Murphy, who was David's special guest.

The Grasshopper's hangover did not quite last until Derek Keehan called, two weeks later. Dr. Keehan was a baby-faced, eccentric astronomy professor, and the closest thing to a friend Harold Adamson had, except for Volcker. Keehan's interest in things beyond earth had led him into ESP research and eventual experimentation with Out-of-Body Experiences. OOBE's, the chubby astronomer called them.

When Harold had first heard the acronym, he'd said this: "OOBE doobie doo."

"Harold," Derek Keehan said over the phone, "we're starting a new series. Why don't you join us this time?" He meant a series of experiments in OOBE generation.

"No, thanks," Harold Adamson said.

"Ah, come on," Keehan said. "You're always depressed after the spring semester. You're bound to be between girlfriends. So it'll do you good. What've you got to lose, anyway?"

Harold thought about this. "I don't have anything to lose," he said finally.

"Good. I'll sign you up, then."

"All right. I suppose you should sign me up."

"You'll enjoy it, you'll see. You may even be the star of the group, for all your skepticism. These things are completely unpredictable. See you on Wednesday."

Harold didn't think that he was going to enjoy it at all. On the other hand, it had been six and a half years since he'd done something completely new to him. The last time had been with a redhead who was fond of handcuffs and pigeon feathers.

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On Wednesday night, Harold was watching a rerun of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* on the weekly cable show called "The Best of the Worst." He'd forgotten about his new commitment, but Dr. Keehan, having anticipated this, came by to pick him up. Harold did not discover how the movie turned out, although he felt that the invaders would probably be defeated.

Keehan drove him to the laboratory complex where the experiments were conducted. There was a lengthy introductory lecture for the first timers, involving the history of OOBE investigation and the latest techniques for generating an out-of-body state. Then there was a discussion period. After this, there was no time for anything else, and everyone left.

"That was very boring," Harold told his friend on the way home. "That was as boring as English 303. I don't think I want to do it anymore."

English 303 was "The Nineteenth-Century British Novel." It was taught at the university by the country's leading authority on the works of Elizabeth Gaskell.

"One more session," Keehan said, struggling to keep his Nash Rambler under control. "Then see if you want to quit." He lowered his voice and spoke as if to a co-conspirator. "To tell you the truth," he went on, "I think they plan it this way. When you're bored, you're more susceptible, more open to the experience."

"I'll believe that when it tastes like a good Bordeaux," Harold said.

Nevertheless, on the following Wednesday night, Harold Adamson returned to OOBE class. He met the woman who was to be his personal *control.* Her name was Demeter, or at least that's what she called herself. She had blonde hair, and he didn't like her. In his mind he pictured her as the type of lover who would be filing her fingernails at the crucial moment.

After a brief preliminary talk, Harold's *control* led him to a small private room. She asked him to take his clothes off. Harold balked. Normally, he never undressed for anyone over the age of twenty-two. Besides, Demeter had the wrong color hair. And besides that, he hadn't emotionally prepared himself for a possible sexual relationship. That was a rather involved procedure requiring the performance of either three or four specific private rituals, depending on the physical characteristics of his partner.

Demeter sighed and refreshed Dr. Adamson's memory concerning the rules of the game. He needn't strip completely unless he wanted to. He

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should be comfortable when he entered the tank. No one would be watching him while he disrobed.

"We went over all this last week," she said. "Weren't you paying attention?"

"I may have forgotten," Harold said defensively. "That's no crime." He didn't appreciate being reprimanded by someone more shallow than himself.

Demeter gestured at the tank, a four-by-eight-foot oval of water perhaps six inches deep.

"The solution is so saline that you can't sink," she said. "The circulating jets will keep you away from the sides, although you won't even feel them. All you have to do is lie there.

"Water and air temperature are strictly controlled. You'll never be too cold or too hot. The room is soundproof and lightproof. We'll attach a few monitors to your skin so we're always sure you're O.K. You're my personal responsibility, and I'll have my eye on your input for as long as you're in here."

She indicated a set of headphones hanging on a wall hook near the tank.

"That's the only other thing you need to wear," she said. "We'll feed the proper frequencies into your head, and then you experience whatever you experience. When you want to talk to us, just talk. The intercom is always open in our direction. If you want us to talk back, we will. Any other questions?"

"Does this lead to a junior lifesaving badge?" Harold asked.

"Soulsaving," Demeter said, and she left the room.

A few minutes later her voice came over the single small speaker. It was a little on the tinny side.

"Let us know when you're ready," she said.

Professor Adamson removed his clothes, peering over his shoulder at odd intervals as if to catch someone entering through a secret door. He left his underpants and his spectacles on. The exposed parts of his body were pale and all but hairless.

He glanced around the room, looking for something to talk into. There was nothing resembling a microphone, so he decided on the small speaker and spoke toward it.

"I'm ready," he said after clearing his throat.

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Harold settled back into the tank. It was like a conscious reexperience of the womb.

A young man entered the room and attached the electrodes to The Grasshopper's body. Although he didn't like young men, Harold was glad that it hadn't been Demeter. The blonde might be his *control*, but it was handing over a little too *much* control to allow her to view him in his underpants.

After the young man left, Harold dipped his right foot in the tank. The water was pleasantly warm, as promised. Harold got in and lay down. He remained supine for a few minutes, adjusting to the sensations of the tank, then he sat up again. He removed the headphones from their hook and clamped them over his ears. Next to the hook was a light switch. He flicked it, and the room went dark. Completely black. Harold settled back into the tank. It was very relaxing, like a conscious reexperience of the womb.

"I'm in the tank now," he said to the artificial night.

Sounds began to come through the headphones. Harold was unable to identify what they were, but he found them rather soothing. He went to sleep.

Later, on the drive home, he told Professor Keehan, "I fell asleep. It was nice and all, but I sleep every night. Sometimes I even dream. We're talking about a very common occurrence here. I don't know what it has to do with your OOBE's."

Keehan smiled to himself. "You'll see," he said. "You will come back, won't you?"

"Well, why not?" Dr. Adamson said. "There are many more wasteful ways in which to spend an evening. At a party where more than 20 percent of the guests are from the economics department, for example."

The following week, The Grasshopper slept again. This time he awoke with the feeling that something had happened while he was asleep. He had no idea what it might have been. He did notice that, strangely, his *control* no longer provoked his dislike. He thought that she was possibly not a shallow person at all.

This bothered him. He went home annd drank three-quarters of a bottle of French wine. Volcker stretched out on his lap and tried to eat the lower

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two buttons off his broadcloth shirt. The professor came to no conclusions, but hoped that his taste in females wasn't changing. It would involve too many adjustments in his life.

For two successive sessions, nothing further happened, except that Harold had increasingly strong feelings for the blonde-haired Demeter. The feelings even began to border on the affectionate, but he was able to keep them in check. Derek Keehan also began to look at him in ways that he could not interpret.

Then, on his fifth trip to the tank, two things happened. Harold Adamson didn't fall asleep, and he spoke to his *control* for the first time.

"There's someone in the room with me," he said.

Although the presences had startled him at first, he was now relatively calm about them.

Demeter's voice came through the tinny speaker: "How do you feel about that?"

"All right, I suppose," Harold said. "Who let them in here?"

"I don't know. How many are there?"

"Three, I think. They're kind of indistinct."

"Have they indicated what they want?"

"No, they seem to be discussing something among themselves. I can't understand. It's some language that I don't understand. They sound like a group of bureaucrats."

"You can tell them to leave if you want to," Demeter said.

"Well, let's see what happens.... They're standing beside the tank now. Next to me. I still can't see exactly what they look like. Now they're reaching underneath me, lifting me up. They must be very strong. It didn't take any effort at all. I feel weightless, as though I were floating in the air. I can turn over and. . . ."

The Grasshopper laughed nervously.

"Uh, I'm looking down at my body. Even though it's dark, I can see myself perfectly plainly. I'm in the tank with my eyes closed. Nobody's holding me up anymore. In fact, I'm falling. . . ."

Later that night, Professor Keehan said, "Welcome to the club."

"You're saying that was an OOBE," Harold Adamson said.

"Of course. What did you think it was?"

"I don't know. It wasn't like anything that's ever happened to me. It wasn't like that feeling I get from wine or redheaded women."

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"It's your first encounter with your spirit body," Keehan said. "Believe me, it just keeps getting better and better. Next time I'll speak to you."

And the next time he did. No sooner had Harold entered the tank, than he felt himself rising into the air. The act didn't require any outside assistance. He was able to roll over and over without falling back into his body. The sensation was pleasurable, but after a while the novelty wore off. Harold didn't know what to do next.

He sensed another presence in the room with him. It had substance but no physical form. When it spoke, there was no sense of speech having taken place. He was just aware of having received the message, all at once. The message was from Dr. Derek Keehan.

Keehan had transmitted something like the following: "We are pleased that you have joined us. We have been waiting for you. We were certain that you had the ability. Would you like to travel now?"

Without framing any words, or knowing how he managed it, Harold was able to send back an affirmative. Immediately, he felt swept away, propelled by energy from some reservoir deep within his being. He had never suspected that it was there. He had never felt so positively energized before, not even with the redhead who liked handcuffs and pigeon feathers.

He was a very enthusiastic traveler.

His postsession conversation with Professor Keehan featured questions like, "Why doesn't everyone do this?"

"Everyone does do this," Keehan had said. "During normal dream time. All we have done is learn to bring it under control."

Oddly, in succeeding days, The Grasshopper found that his back was aching less than it had in years. He still walked with a slight stoop, but it was more or less integrated into his gait. His arms swung freely at his sides. He also began dating a raven-haired assistant professor of psychology who had had her first spontaneous OOBE at the age of seven. She was thirty-four years old, and interacting with her required the practice of no formal rituals.

Four Wednesdays passed. Harold was now able to say, "A lot of things I see are familiar to me. I recognize places; I recognize people. Are these the real people and places, or some other representation of them?"

"They are both," Dr. Keehan said. "As you are both your physical and spirit body."

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Harold nodded as if he understood. "Then there are times when it is all completely alien,' he said. "Where are we then? Is it still this universe?"

"It is this *multi*universe," Keehan told him. "And you may now explore it as much as you like. You are as adept as we are. We expected that of you, and you have surpassed even our expectations. So go where your curiosity leads you."

"I will," Harold said. "But at the same time, I feel there is some further purpose to what you are doing with me. Am I right?"

"Yes, you are," Keehan said. "When you are ready to discover it, let me know. It demands of you that you face your greatest fear, however."

Harold could no longer imagine a fear that wouldn't be transcended by the high positive energy of his out-of-body state.

"I think I'm ready now," he said.

Keehan looked at him with the impassive eye of a clinician. He shrugged.

"Perhaps so," he said.

When it happened, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Harold Adamson lifted out of his body with the ease to which he had become accustomed. He marveled, as he always did, that he could inhabit so many levels of being simultaneously: He could think, yet there was no thought; he was linked to a body, yet he was completely free of it; he was filled with everything there was, yet he was nothing.

He soon felt another presence nearby. Without focusing his attention, he became aware that it was Professor Keehan. They communicated in that way beyond words. Keehan led; Harold followed.

It would have been a very long journey, if reckoned in terms of light-years or any of the other clumsy yardsticks of physical measurement. But in the out-of-body state, the normal restrictions of time and space did not apply.

When this idea permeated Harold Adamson, there was the sudden and unexpected sensation of terror. It was the fear of something almost glimpsed, something overwhelmingly important that was just as suddenly swallowed by the void. The inclination was to return to the dormant body at once. But Harold resisted. If he had had corporeal teeth, he would have gritted them.

The fear slowly waned, but a remnant of it stayed with him. He pulled it behind him like a vestigial tail.

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There was the steady perception of movement. There were experiences of light and the total absence of light, of spinning worlds and whirling galaxies, of life and its lack, of the ebb and flow of plasma. There were celestial configurations as yet unobserved by the earthbound human eye. There were beings bodied and disembodied, as well as transitional.

Then there was rest. And once again the fear.

It was a place that was not a place, and it was perceived as gray, a pearly silver-gray. It had no form and it had no end. It was all there was. In the mind of no-thought, Harold Adamson realized it was the focus of his deepest anxiety, of the all-encompassing dread. He had arrived at that cold, entropic gray space that served as energy sink for the multiverse. This was where it all ran down. This was what would spread inexorably until everything else was under its dominion.

Once again there was panic. Once again the frantic urge to return to the familiar comfort of the life body.

In his not-knowing, Harold knew that this time he would be unable to resist the urge. Yet he knew that his physical being would be unable to bear the stress of what it would now know. He felt for Dr. Keehan, found his presence. And realized that Dr. Keehan was free of the fear.

At that moment he discerned the other presences. What had seemed an empty space was filled with them, uncountable billions of them, and yet it was not full. They surrounded him, were in and of him. And they were not at rest. There was the sensation of perpetual motion.

And he understood further that the gray space had substance. It was, in physical terms, like a thick, nonsticky fluid.

Dr. Keehan materialized an idea for him. If it had been expressed verbally, the words would have been these: "This is the purpose of what we do."

The idea became an image. It was Dr. Keehan assuming visible form, a luminous ball with two glowing cords depending from it like the spindly limbs of a grasshopper. The cords ended in something akin to hands.

Grasshopper, Harold knew without thinking. *They used to call me "The Grasshopper."*

One of the ghostly hands closed, compressing the substance of the fluid space. When the hand opened again, there was revealed a tiny point of light, with a satellite circling so fast that it was no more than a blur. A hydrogen atom.

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The luminous form's second hand crimped and flicked one of its shimmering fingers. The atom was knocked loose. It rapidly gained momentum, and although receding, appeared to remain in the same spot. There was the immediate perception of some critical velocity having been reached, then a high-pitched tinkling sound. The atom disappeared.

As it did, Harold Adamson became one with awareness. Here was the process of creation, and it was being repeated, over and over, countless billions of repetitions in the passage of no-time. It required no more effort than to will it to be. The infinitude of high-pitched notes blended into a single pure tone beyond music.

Harold phrased the concept in nonwords: "The atoms are returned to the multiverse?"

And Dr. Keehan signified: "That is our belief."

The fear was no longer associated with Harold Adamson. Instead, if he had had a face, there would have been a radiant smile on it. And in his undifferentiated mind rested the thought: The law of entropy applies to a *closed* thermodynamic system.

The Grasshopper formed an atom and launched it on its journey. He witnessed as it gathered speed without moving. Then it was gone.

And he was in the tank, floating on a warm cushion of highly saline water. Inside his head was the fading echo of a high-pitched tinkling sound.

(from page 33)

lives, even as subhumans, are made sacred by the intelligence they *do* have.

What is most disturbing about *A Different Flesh* is how little Turtledove had to change American history in order to tell this story. Our treatment of Indians and blacks throughout history scarcely differed from the treatment accorded sims in this book. And if the American people in Turtledove's alternate history could learn respect for another species, why was it so hard for us to learn the same lesson in regard to fellow *Homo sapiens*?

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In "The Big Wish" Martha Soukup ("Master of the Game," November 1987) tells a tale laced with irony of a woman, torn between two men, who reminds us to be careful what we wish for. We might just get our wish.

The Big Wish

By Martha Soukup

LATER IT WOULD be cold comfort that she had never tried to fall in love. Love was a complication. Marianne had been content to live alone.

Then came Geoffrey, and there was no doubt that he was wonderful and he loved her. She had lived with him for almost a year when she went to New York to take summer computer courses, for her tech writing; and there she met Vince. She never intended to fall in love with him, either.

Clearly, there was a crisis. She told Geoffrey about Vince — they kept no secrets — and Vince knew about Geoffrey. Each waited in his different way for her decision.

Marianne waited until final exams were over, reserved a motel room in Queens. She stared at the graffiti in the subway car. She signed in, collected her key, found her room, and closed the door behind her to think.

When Marianne was very young, she knew a secret. All her friends

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knew it, too; but as they used it and forgot, she remembered.

When Marianne was four years old, a circus came to town. She and Crystabelle saw a commercial for the circus on a Saturday cartoon show.

"Wow," said Crystabelle.

They were figuring out the difference between cartoon people and real people that summer. Cartoon people lived somewhere flat where you could never touch them, but real people you could touch and talk to. The spangled acrobats and tumbling clowns in the commercial were really out there somewhere — "coming soon to the Amphitheater."

But Crystabelle's mother said the circus was out of the question this year, honey. So did Marianne's mother.

"I want to do it," Crystabelle said. "I want to see the elephant. I want to be in the parade!"

Marianne did, too, but she held back. "Next year maybe," she said.

"*This* year," said Crystabelle. And she screwed up her face and made her wish.

The next week, Marianne watched on television as really Crystabelle, not a cartoon, rode in the brightly colored box on the back of the elephant. She was hurting with envy, but she remembered: that was Crystabelle's only wish.

When Crystabelle's family had moved to Kentucky five months later, Marianne gently reminded her that she wouldn't have had to move if she hadn't used up her wish. Crystabelle stared through her tears and said, "Don't be funny."

"You shouldn't have used your wish for the elephant."

"I rode the elephant because I won the coloring contest!" shouted Crystabelle. "Stop lying!" Marianne tried to make her remember, but Crystabelle hit her hard on the arm and ran off.

Marianne had spent the rest of the day tucked inside the little closet under the staircase, thinking.

Marianne and Geoffrey fell naturally into togetherness. Sex was warm, if unspectacular, and they talked about everything. Geoffrey listened to her fears and dreams, and he made her feel more comfortable with both than she had ever been.

She even thought she might tell him about the secret — but she could never quite bring herself to talk about it. Wishing seemed silly when you

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were grown-up. And while she and Geoffrey were silly and childish and giggly, she didn't want to be silly and serious at the same time. He would have forgotten like everyone else.

Who first mentioned marriage? Probably neither of them. They both began planning for it without either proposing.

As everyone said, Marianne and Geoffrey were meant to be.

In kindergarten, wishes began snapping like flashbulbs. Eddie Tannenbaum got a sharp red two-wheeler, but it took him a year to learn to ride it. Lisa McKay's family adopted not one but two puppies; the next week a litter of kittens was born on Elaine Marx's back porch, and she was allowed to keep them all. Both girls grew bored with the pets, and gave most of them away. Bill Coleman's parents reunited; Marianne, pursing her lips, allowed silently to herself that that was probably a good enough thing to spend your only wish on.

And in five wild weeks, Sandi, Arnold, Sharon, and Meg each had birthday parties successively bigger and grander than the last: very exciting, and quickly passed.

The last of her classmates' wishes went for Tony Patterson's three-run homer in Peewee League. Tony was still talking about it two years later in fourth grade, by which time most of the kids avoided him. He hadn't hit a home run since.

Marianne watched the wishes dry up, and made notes. A wish was a one-time thing, so it had better be important. And there was no going back once you made it — no Oops, let me try that again. Which must be why people didn't want to remember that their wishes were gone. There would most always be something in the future more worth wishing for. None of the things wished for seemed important once the wish was used up.

She tended her wish, held it against the future, and promised herself that when she used it, it would be big. Really big.

The motel door closed behind Marianne, and she began thinking of Vince. She felt she ought to be thinking of Geoffrey, too, but Vince filled her thoughts, the entire field of vision inside her head, and she could not remember what Geoffrey looked like. He was handsome; she remembered that much.

Vince was not handsome. Rugged, perhaps. Charismatic, certainly; he

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dominated a room, made everyone laugh. It was exciting to be with him; all eyes were always on them. But not physically her type at all: burly-chested, thick-waisted. His hands were wide and dark, olive tan; she could see his hand against the very pale skin of her upper arm, squeezing a little too tight, hurting a little. Marianne's breath quickened at the sudden clearness of the tactile and visual image. She hated it when he used too much strength, but she knew he didn't mean to; his moments of roughness made her tender toward his frequent gentleness. And her tenderness would burn deeper —

She didn't know what to do with this unaccustomed passion. Hormones, she told herself. Doctor, the problem is that I have a little bit of blood running through my hormone stream.

"It's a short quarter, but it's still five weeks," Geoffrey had said. "That's a long time. If anything happens — I'll understand." It was a short time, and nothing could possibly happen, she told him, lovingly, securely. And ten days later, in her daily phone call home, she was crying, telling him that a man she had just met had fallen in love with her. Geoffrey was the only person she could cry with. "But that's not the worst thing."

"What?" he asked, his voice very quiet.

"Maybe — me, too."

He hadn't complained, hadn't shouted. He told her it was her choice; he wanted her to be happy. He did not weep, but she did. She could not imagine crying with Vince. Vince made her feel tough, feel New York, made her life with Geoffrey seem puzzingly soft.

"What do you want from me?" she had asked Vince, his strong, dark arms circling her from behind.

"Leave him. Marry me." He touched her engagement ring: "No. But I wish you could."

It hurt, and it was a stupid, stupid problem.

The solution was simple: Geoffrey had prior claim. She knew they would be happy together. She knew, despite his stoicism, he would be miserable if she left.

The solution was simple: Obey her most urgent needs.

She threw a bed pillow hard across the room. It knocked over a table lamp.

The solution was inescapable.

* * *

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"Will you always love me?" asked Geoffrey, Vince.

"Yes," she said.

She felt faintly ridiculous. She had never seen an adult make the wish. Children could approach wishes with wholehearted faith, but she had no idea how to go about it.

She turned off all the lights, turned on the heat lamp in the bathroom. A red glow bled from the half-open door She stood before the mirror on the closet and stared at herself, a tall, narrow young woman, backlit in artificial sunset, her shoulder-length brown hair turned to copper. She opened her mouth.

"I wish —" She broke off. Did she really want to do this? She had saved this one chance her entire twenty-six years. It was her only wish.

Geoffrey, Vince.

"I wish I could be with both Geoffrey and Vince. Each. Equally. Completely. I wish."

Nothing happened. She closed her eyes and wished silently, hard. No. She opened her eyes. Suddenly she was afraid that she might have actually used it up when she was very small, and forgotten; or worse, that she had fooled herself with a childish dream all these years.

"Damn it," she whispered.

And it started. Vertigo almost toppled her; she grabbed the hall sink-top. Her head pounded.

She felt she was peeling away from herself; she felt like two plies of tissue being gently separated. In the mirror, her reflection wavered. She watched, confused, as it pulled slowly apart, becoming two Mariannes.

Each image of herself was slightly translucent. She looked away from the mirror and recoiled a step in shock at the sight of herself right in front of her nose. Herself stepped back, too. Which was she, the right or the left? The vertigo hit again; she concentrated on being one Marianne (right; left!), and it settled.

She backed away slowly, saying nothing. She was afraid of hearing the other's voice. She sat on the edge of the bed. The other righted the desk lamp and turned it on. Marianne, on the bed, wondered why the light was so dim. She looked at the lamp and saw two: one lit, one on its side, dark. The other Marianne was looking at the prone lamp. She reached for it; her hand passed through it. She moved the standing lamp an inch to the side.

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It was not what she expected — but now she could have both lives. She could change her life.

Marianne on the bed walked to the desk — carefully passing her twin, who pulled back against the wall — and stood the fallen lamp. It and the other were not quite aligned; looking at them made her feel her eyes were crossed, although the rest of the room was in sharp focus. The lighted lamp, transparent to her eyes, had no substance in her hand. The other was solid and real. She lit it, and the room brightened. She returned to the bed and ripped off the bedspread. The bed stayed ghostily made. Other Marianne attempted to pick up the rumpled quilt and failed. She touched the one on the bed, slowly drew it back, replaced it. Her counterpart could see the white sheets through the patterned cloth.

It was not what she expected — but now she could have both lives. She could change her life. Vince. Heat spread from her stomach, to make her heart flutter, to make her groin clench. Vince.

They caught each other's eye. She could see through her twin, but that Marianne was as real as she, lived in a world as urgent as hers, wanted what she wanted. One must go home to Geoffrey. A sense of loss surprised her; if she went off with Vince, she would not see Geoffrey again. She thought of holding him, lips soft against his neck, his little purring sound.

Who would go where? She pulled a coin from her pocket. The other shook her head. To assign a man to a side meant one of them would have to break the silence. As she hesitated, the other took a pad of paper with the hotel imprint — a solid pad remained on the bedside table — and scribbled VINCE under the imprint, GEOFFREY on the plain white bottom. She ripped the paper horizontally, jumbled the pieces behind her back. Marianne pointed to one side. She mutely held out the scrap with the verdict. Marianne picked up her suitcase and went her separate ways.

Two Mariannes going to the man she loves. The relief on Geoffrey's face; the whoop of astonishment from Vince.

She holds him, holds him; she can't get enough of him, it seems. She does not think about the other man. She will not think about the other man. That belongs to another her.

Now and again he asks her what she is thinking, and she makes a joke

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and turns the subject away. She has always been good at diverting attention. She turns it away from her own mind, time and time again.

Marianne and the man she loves. Everyone remarks on how well suited they are.

When Geoffrey met her at the airport, she was unable to find him in the crowd. He kissed her and took her carry-on bag before she realized he had been standing right in front of her as she looked through the strange faces. His face was no less strange to her than any other.

She spent the next weeks in a daze. This quiet, gentle person — who was he? Why was she with him? Where was the passion of the month before, the dizzy, excited high?

"Is something wrong, honey?" he asked.

Marianne turned quickly from the dresser mirror. "What? Oh. No."

"All right," Geoffrey said, taking off his socks, but he looked at her with concern in his eyes. She never could hide anything from him. She rarely wanted to.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My mind is — somewhere else."

"Oh," said Geoffrey. She was silent for a while, pulling the covers up to her chin. "You know," Geoffrey said quietly, "you could fly to New York. You could afford a few days off."

"The wonder of being self-employed," she said wryly. "I could, but I don't think it would be good business practice."

"Who's talking about business?"

"Wasn't that the topic?" she said, knowing he'd see through her light tone but trying anyway.

"You've hardly mentioned Vince at all since you came home." She stiffened. "Sorry. If you'd rather not —"

"It's O.K.," she said. "I just don't think I should impose on you."

"It's what I'm here for," he said. He tossed his pants in the hamper and got into bed. He lay curled away from her. She reached out and flicked off the light. He said, "If you ever change your mind —"

"Oh sweetie," she said. She put her arms around him, pulled him against her. "My beauty, my darling, it's O.K., I chose you. . . ." She rocked him gently until he was asleep, and all she could see was the crumpled scrap of paper: GEOFFREY. "I chose you."

* * *

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Twice she caught herself with her hand on the phone. When she realized whom she was about to call, she dropped the handset into the cradle and started picking up the room, scraping old paint off the windowsill, anything busy. Working to breathe.

But it passed; each time it passed — she told herself it must pass entirely soon enough. She had chosen Geoffrey, one way or another, and with Geoffrey she would stay. When she was at home, alone, like now, and her work was finished, she had little else to do but repeat that to herself. And stay away from the phone.

The phone was in her hand. "Hello?"

"Hello," she said automatically, and she knew numbly that she had called Vince. There was a long, fuzzy pause on the line.

"Marianne? God, Mari, is that you?" His deep voice climbed half an octave in delight. She couldn't think what to say. She was having trouble breathing again. "It's been a month — five weeks — I didn't think I'd hear from you. It is you, isn't it?"

Of course. She remembered two slightly different motel rooms, one solid, one indistinct. Her Vince was still alone.

"Mari?"

Marianne hung up. Talking to this Vince would tell her nothing. She would have to see them, their images, in person. That was what she wanted to know; that was why she had called. She had to know. She had to find out what she had lost, coming out on the wrong side of her wish.

She had been blocking it out of her mind, like Crystabelle had so many years ago. But hadn't she wished better than Crystabelle?

Marianne packed just a few things, quickly, before she could change her mind. She did leave a note: "Hon, you were right: I do need a vacation. Just a few days. If Lloyd calls, tell him he'll get the manual by the twenty-third. Don't worry about me. I'll try to call. Love you intensely, M."

In the cab to the airport, she thought intense thoughts. Of Vince.

It was the same motel, but a different room. Because it was late, Marianne spent the night there. The next morning she went to the desk and asked for room 41. The clerk groused, but exchanged the keys.

The bed looked ordinary. She looked over at the lamp. There was something about it. She moved it. Its ghostly image remained.

Marianne sat straight down on the floor, hugging the solid lamp to her

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chest. She wasn't crazy. There was a world in which everything was as another Marianne had caused it to be, and here in the same city as the other Marianne, she could see it.

She was almost at Vince's building when the flaw in her plan struck, too late. Vince emerged from a laundromat across the street. She ducked into a florist's and busied herself staring at the bright tiger lilies in the display case. A hand squeezed her shoulder.

"Hi. Shopping for me?" She stood still. "Excuse me. You are Marianne Bruner?" His hand pulled, and she turned, slowly, and looked at him, not breathing.

He arched an eyebrow. "Hello again. Fancy meeting you here."

"Hello, Vince." She was fascinated by the iron calm in her voice. His hand remained on her shoulder, feeling absurdly warm.

"Why didn't you tell me you were in town when you phoned?" The laundry gave off a damp, soapy smell. By a slight effort of concentration, she could smell either soap or roses and carnations. She could abstract his magnetic voice, look right into his eyes.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you." His eyes were green ringed with brown; with a little more concentration, she could make them look as alien, unreal, as Geoffrey had looked when she first got home.

"We're a block away from my place, you know. I don't think you got here by accident."

"I'm meeting a client."

"In a flower shop?"

"I thought I'd send Geoffrey some flowers. It's a year since we met." Longer than that, but the lie came easily.

"A block from my apartment?"

"Near my client's office."

"Damn it, Mari!" He grabbed her other shoulder, gripped her tightly. "You told me you had a decision to make, and then I never heard from you! Never! Now I find you hiding out in my neighborhood. You told me you were big on honesty — I'd like to hear some!"

How his temper angered her. She wanted to shout at him. She wanted to bury her head in his shoulder. She opened her mouth with no idea what she would say.

"Excuse me. May I help you with something?" Marianne turned to see

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a plump Oriental woman with a disapproving set to her lips.

Everything rushed back calm. "I'd like to wire a dozen red roses," she said smoothly. From the corner of her eye, she saw Vince wrench his laundry to his shoulder and stalk out of the store. The shopkeeper watched him leave, and smiled at Marianne.

"New York or out of state?"

"Out of state," she said, and mechanically finished the transaction.

She phoned Vince's apartment to make sure he was not there, and let herself in with the copy of his key that she had kept.

Here, where the other Marianne must be living, she expected to see many ghosts like the lamp in the motel; but as she moved rapidly through the apartment, she found nothing. No ghost magazines where the other she had tossed it; no ghost tampons in the medicine chest. She moved rapidly from room to room, breathing with difficulty, not knowing whether it was from fear of Vince coming back, or from frustration and anger. Why was there no evidence of her twin here? Stupid, stupid! She would have gone straight to him. If the random chance had come out differently — Damn, damn, the wish was wasted.

A movement in the front room. She swallowed and hid behind the doorway, trying to think what to say to Vince when he found her. But there were no sounds, no footsteps. She peeked around.

Three transparent people walked around the kitchen. The shorter man had a dozen keys at his belt. They walked through Vince's furniture as they pointed and discussed the apartment.

Empty. There are no ghosts because the other apartment is empty, Marianne thought. We moved! Of course, we'd need a larger place.

She walked right through the woman on her way out.

It took her only a day to find them.

Vince did much of his writing for a large telecommunications company a short subway commute away. The first time she saw him arrive at the glass-walled office building, he was solid, her world's Vince. But an hour later another Vince walked up to the building, briefcase in hand. And another Marianne. The sun streamed through them.

Her heart pounded. She made herself wait, far down the block, until they finally emerged from the building; she followed them into the sub-

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way and sat well back from them in the car, where she had a three-quarter rear view of them, nervous that her counterparts would turn and see her.

But the other Marianne stared straight ahead with an expression Marianne recognized from feeling it on her own face: she was upset. She wanted Vince to notice. She needed him to ask what was wrong before she could tell him.

Vince did not ask. He sat with his own thoughts, unreadable to the spying Marianne.

They were living in the ground apartment of a two-flat. In real life, it must still be vacant, although it seemed someone had either moved his possessions in or most of his possessions out: she saw a solid table, some chairs, a bureau, half a dozen cartons. The kitchen window, in her world, was not locked.

They were in the living room. Vince watched television, flipped through a magazine; she had papers on her lap, lining out sentences and writing new ones in. They didn't talk for a long time; finally she said something. He snapped an answer. She shook her head, violently. Marianne could just make out the faintest burr when she talked, nothing when he did. There was no way to tell what they were arguing about.

Marianne, concealed in a corner, pleaded silently with Vince. Whatever it is, if it's her fault, just tell her it's all right! Geoffrey would do it.

What Vince did, Geoffrey would not: he threw down the magazine and grabbed her. She stared wildly at him. He kissed her, and Marianne, behind the love seat, watched her melt and felt herself melt as well. The passion had not faded. Oh Lord, it had not. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, the room was empty. Where? She found the bedroom and watched from the hall as he pulled off her sweater, pulled her jeans open, ran his rough hands over her body. She was moaning; Marianne could barely hear it. Marianne moaned, too. He kissed her and entered her, and Marianne felt more than ever the frustration, the terrible frustration, that she had not had him and never would, the tyranny of blind chance.

The woman on the bed cried out, and Vince wrenched back and forward one last time and fell exhausted beside her. Marianne leaned against the doorframe and let tears flow down her face. She wished she had not come to see this. She would never be able to give up her beautiful, thwarted memories of Vince.

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When her vision cleared a little, she focused on the phantom Marianne. She lay isolated on her side of the bed, pulled away from the sleeping man, clutching her pillow. Her face was slick with tears. She said something.

Marianne could just hear that single word.

"Geoffrey," she said.

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Mr. Bretnor's captivating new story concerns Miss Trivia Lacklustre of Goose Falls, Mass. and her purchase of a broom at Montgomery Ward's. They don't make brooms the way they used to . . .

Aunt's Flight

By Reginald Bretnor

CHARLES AUGUSTUS LINDBERGH was the first man to fly alone across the Atlantic —there's no doubt about that — but he was not the first *person* to do so. The honor — and I believe we can all agree it was an honor — belongs to my great-aunt, (Miss) Trivia Lacklustre of Goose Falls, Massachusetts, where the Lacklustre side of our family has lived since the seventeenth century.

She was a big, tall, gaunt woman with bright little black eyes in her pale face and her hair done in a great flat brown bun on the top of her head. (My father always insisted it wasn't real hair at all but a specially large cow-flop she'd picked up someplace. But then, he never did like her.) Anyhow, she'd inherited the old Lacklustre place, which she ran well enough, farming it with the help of a couple of hired men, and taking an active part in the doings of the Goose Falls Congregational Church, where everyone said she was sweet on old Mr. Barrow, the widowed pastor, who paid her no heed at all. Anything needed doing around the church or in

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the congregation — or, for that matter, in all of Goose Falls, what there was of it — she pitched in and did, elbowing aside anybody who got in her way, but the folks put up with it because she could always be counted on to help with the kids or take care of granny or bake half a dozen big apple pies or come over quick if a sheep or something needed help birthing. Goose Falls didn't exactly love Aunt Trivia, but they sure didn't hate her. One thing especially they *didn't* like was her doing all her shopping at Monkey Ward's down to Salem instead of at Luke Correy's general store. It seemed like she thought Goose Falls wasn't good enough for her. (Of course, everybody else shopped there, too, but that was only once in a while. Remember, this was back in 1904, before the Wright Brothers had got off the ground at Kitty Hawk even, and she had to get her big bay horse harnessed up to the buckboard each time and drive clear over there, all of six miles.) Anyway, she did it, and it was there she bought all her brooms — *all* of them, because she went through brooms like old Sherman going through Georgia. Every time she took over from anybody, first thing she did was fetch her own broom and sweep the place out, sweeping like crazy. Didn't matter was it the church or the Odd Fellows hall or the grocery store/post office corner.

Anyhow, every time she'd wear a broom out, she'd get mad as anything and hurry over to Monkey Ward's to raise hell about it. She wouldn't speak to anyone except the manager of the Housewares Department, Junius Brutus Badger himself, a thin, sour man with gray side-whiskers and a tight mouth, who always wore a heavy gold watch chain with a funny green stone charm hung to it. The gossip was, his family had been in Salem when the first Pilgrims got there, which made him a part Indian, I reckon. Mostly, folks were scared of him because he was so formal and cold, sort of like you'd expect of an undertaker. But not Great-Aunt Trivia. No, sir!

That summer, when she'd wore out a brand-new broom in just one busy weekend, first thing Monday morning she brought it in, waving it under Junius Brutus's nose like it was something dirty the cat'd done.

"Look at this, Badger!" she cried. "Monkey Ward's ought to be ashamed, they should, selling such trash! Why, I—"

Mr. Badger interrupted her. "*Montgomery* Ward's," he declared frigidly. "*Montgomery* Ward's, Mrs. Lacklustre."

"*Miss* Lacklustre!" she shot back.

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Well, it was sort of a standoff. There they were, looking each other right in the eye, and she told me it was like his thinking engine was going eighty to the dozen, while she kept on waving that broom so the whole store could see it. It must've lasted two, three minutes, but finally he actually smiled, just a little, like a one-inch crack in an iceberg, but something she'd never seen him do before.

"Mrs. Lacklustre," he said, "you are an established customer — may I say a valued customer? — of *Montgomery* Ward's. So—" He cleared his throat, and it sounded like something dry rubbing its hind legs together. "—so I shall bring you a new broom with our compliments. It is a very special broom, of an advanced design, and it will not only stand up to any usage you may put it to, but will also ease your labors."

"I'm not asking to ease up my labors!" sniffed Aunt Trivia, indignant that anybody'd think such a thing.

"I shall have to go home to get it," he continued, "for my family has been giving it its first trial, so I must ask you to wait — oh, perhaps fifteen minutes. If you'd care to go back to my office, I shall have one of the clerks prepare tea for you."

She didn't answer him, but sat down, managing to convey the idea that she'd never accept tea from anyone who sold brooms that wore out before you could even get the schoolhouse swept out. While she waited, she voiced her complaints to every customer who came within range, and when Junius Brutus returned, she was feeling quite a bit better.

She regarded the broom he was carrying, and remarked she'd never seen the like of it in her born days, and wasn't it too big to get into corners? And what kind of straw was it made of, all funny and foreign-looking? And that sort of silvery wire it was bound to the stick with?

Dubiously, she took it in hand. "Why, it hardly weighs *anything!*" she exclaimed, taking a couple of test swipes at the carpet.

His hand on her elbow, Junius Brutus started escorting her to the door. "I can promise you that as your workday advances, it'll weigh less and less if you want it to. You'll find it a most versatile broom, Mrs. Lacklustre — a true scientific triumph. And you're the first to have one anywhere in these parts, at least nowadays — I mean before they come on the market, as it were. You'll find it *responding* to you, Mrs. Lacklustre, so you mustn't—" To her amazement, he actually winked at her. "—let too many people

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know about it. For business reasons, that is, yes, indeed. No, don't thank me. Thank *Montgomery* Ward's."

He walked her clear to the buckboard, and helped her up into it, and it seemed to her that the broom in her hand was also giving her a help up.

"Well, it better last longer than the last one you sold me," she said ungraciously as she gathered the reins.

"Oh, it will, it will!" Junius Brutus Badger assured her.

AS I may have suggested, Aunt Trivia was a woman of great strength of character, and when she began to find out what her new broom really could do, it didn't faze her one bit. She started right off by sweeping her kitchen, and right in the middle of it, the egg man knocked at the door. "Well," she said to the broom, like one talks to things when one's alone. "You just stand there till I see who's here. I'll be back in two shakes."

Without looking, she went to lean it back in a corner, got her eggs, said good-bye to the egg man, and turned back to it. It wasn't leaning against the wall. Broom end up, it was standing straight up on its end, waiting for her.

"Sake's alive!" she exclaimed, mightily pleased. "Why, I bet you could fly clear up to the ceiling had you a mind to!"

Slowly, the broom rose till its straw touched the ceiling, where it brought down a cobweb she'd not seen before.

"Why, it's just like those books by Mr. Jules Verne!" she thought, and after that, there was nothing for it but she had to experiment. It didn't take her more'n half a day to find out the broom could not only fly by itself but also carry anything she put on it, including herself.

"It'll be just the thing to take little rides on in the cool of the evening," she thought, "'specially if I fix me some sort of sidesaddle. I'm sure not going to try straddling a hard, narrow thing like that broomhandle. Besides, it wouldn't be modest."

She got to work and fixed up a sort of sidesaddle out of an old leather seat cushion, with a clamp to fasten it on with, but so she could take it off in no time when she had sweeping to do; and she started taking short flights after nightfall, first making sure the hired hands wouldn't catch on. She knew about the old days in Salem, and what they did to women whom they suspected of broom riding and such, and she didn't want anyone

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getting ideas even though she knew her broom was some kind of new French invention.

I was probably the only person she told the whole story to. She was pushing eighty at the time, and I was only a little squirt, but I was her favorite grandnephew, and she knew I wasn't one to go gossiping round. She told me how she stitched a stirrup to that saddle, and fastened a sort of horn to it, like regular ladies' saddles used to have, for her other leg. It was then, too, that she suddenly got suspicious of Junius Brutus's intentions. *I'll just bet,* she told herself, *old Badger's figuring on me getting interested and flying way up high, and maybe a big wind hitting me and my falling off. That'd get me out of his hair, wouldn't it just!* That was when she invented the first safety belt, something she should've gotten a patent on, making it out of the cinch from her daddy's old Whitman saddle. "With that round me, I was safe as houses," she told me. "Why, I could even doze off and sleep like a baby, my head resting on the straw part."

On those first flights, she just went up a few hundred feet so she could look down on Goose Falls and parts of Salem, simply enjoying the air, and maybe dipping down once in a while to peek into somebody's window. But after two, three weeks of that, she found it no longer satisfied her. She remembered she'd never really been much of anywhere, excepting that one trip to Atlantic City her folks took her on when she turned twenty-one, when the sea gull spoiled her best Easter hat. And she began to wonder about all sorts of places she'd read about, like New London and Boston and William Penn's Philadelphia. And the more she wondered, the farther away she wanted to go. She dreamed about flying to Richmond, and getting there a sight faster than Daddy had when he was soldiering, and visiting New Orleans, though she'd heard it was wicked. But even that wasn't enough. Finally she realized that it was to England she really wanted to go, where her ancestors came from and which her granny always kept talking about even though she'd never been there. So she made her decision. She'd fly over to England and then maybe to France, but she'd tell folks she was going up to visit her second cousin, Braddock Lacklustre, up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He was from the Tory side of the family, who'd moved north when General Washington won, but still he'd be happy to see her, if he and his sons weren't out after herring.

She planned everything very carefully. She got out her daddy's old black Civil War saddlebags, and her Iver Johnson revolver in case of eagles

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and such, and a big, light wicker suitcase in which she could stash her saddle and stuff whenever she landed, and her ma's big rabbit-skin coat in case it got cold; and she made up a slew of sandwiches for the trip over, and bought herself a new thermos from Monkey Ward's for her coffee. She figured she could always get water. Some of the most important things — like a little compass in a gold-plated locket, and her geography book with maps from back in her grammar school days, and a new Monkey Ward catalog in case she had to tend to the wants of nature — she added in last.

That very night she took off. There was a real harvest moon up, and a lovely soft breeze, and after she got to maybe a thousand feet up, she just gave the broom its head and followed the coastline, glorying in the moon's light on the sea and singing old favorites to herself: "The Lost Chord" and "John Brown's Body" and "Kiss Me Again, Nellie" and suchlike. After a bit, she started taking an occasional nap; and she reached Halifax just before daybreak, fresh as a daisy. She landed out of sight behind some trees on a hillside, hid all her gear in the suitcase after treating herself to some coffee, and walked on into town. The very first person she met, an old milkman, told her exactly where Cousin Braddock was living and very kindly gave her a ride almost all the way there; and Cousin Braddock's wife and daughters were right glad to see her, even though he was off fishing and she'd woken them up. She stayed with them a couple of days, hoping he'd be back, but they guessed the herring must really be running, so finally she bade them good-bye, first sweeping out their whole house and their barn so she wouldn't be too beholden to them.

She knew that, so long as she took off in the dark and kept high enough, it wouldn't really matter whether she flew day or night, so she left before sunrise and headed for Iceland, which her geography book seemed to show as the best place to set down. She was really enjoying herself, watching the fishing boats and big ships down on the ocean; and after a bit, she ate a couple of her sandwiches and one of the two kipper herrings Braddock's wife had wrapped up for her. It seemed like no time at all before she found herself over Iceland, only she could hardly believe it because there was no ice at all. She dropped down at dusk right near a big log farmhouse; then, carrying her broom and her suitcase, she knocked at the door, meanwhile petting the big dog that came out barking at her. Well, the farmer and his family couldn't speak English, and she didn't know a word of their language, but she counted up to ten for them in Norwegian,

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and they laughed and invited her in, just in time to set down to dinner. Next morning, before she said good-bye to them, she swept out, not just their house, but also their barnyard, which they sure appreciated. (The broom straws looked as if they were wearing a bit, but she decided she'd not worry about it just then.)

The weather was still wonderful, but the breeze was a lot stiffer, so she had to tie down her old Easter hat with a scarf. After a bit, she began to get bored, and so once, just for fun, she swooped down on a rusty old freighter and called out hello to the crew, who looked like they were maybe Portygees or Greeks. Then she felt sort of sorry, because didn't they take on! They ran back and forth, shouting and making all sorts of strange signs, and one or two of them actually jumped overboard. So she waved them good-bye and flew on. She saw a few whales, but not one single iceberg, and no birds of prey menaced her, so she ate her lunch and settled down for a nap. No one was watching the skies back in those days — in fine weather there was no need to. There were no aircraft out patrolling, and no ack-ack guns to go shooting you down. The eagles and hawks she'd halfway expected never did show up, but of course there were sea gulls. When she woke up, she spied one of them following her, flying right below her, no more than a couple of yards off. Then she remembered what had happened to her hat back in Atlantic City — and right then nature called. Abruptly, she got an idea. She whispered to her broom to fly really carefully, and she waited till that old gull was directly in line. Then she let go — and scored a direct hit, right amidships — thwack! "It maybe wasn't too ladylike," she told me, "but it sure did my heart good, paying him back for my hat."

She spent the next night in Ireland, but far up in the hills because she didn't know anyone there, and because she'd heard things about the Irish in Boston. Then she flew off to England with the highest of hopes, only to have them shattered almost immediately. Most of all, she'd wanted to see London, but when she looked down, all she could see was coal smoke, and that in midsummer. It was the same over Birmingham and about ten other cities. Of course, she could've set down someplace in the country, but she was so annoyed after all her trouble and having come all that way that she sat back on her saddle and actually wondered whether she ought to fly straight home again. Then she remembered a schoolteacher who was a friend of her daddy's and who was always talking about the south

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of France, about Nice and those places, and how wonderful it was there.

"Well," she said to herself, "why not?"

She looked up the south of France in her geography book, consulted her compass, and set off directly; and before very long, she found herself looking down on the blue, blue Mediterranean and on Nice itself. She checked against her map to make sure, and that's what it was, so she circled it several times, looking for a likely landing spot. The air was warm, and the land smelled just lovely, and she told herself that if she swooped down fast enough and lit maybe in a wood, chances were either nobody'd see her, or even if they did, it wouldn't matter too much — after all, it wouldn't be like being seen by people back home.

The truth of the matter was that all the color and the softness of the breeze and the sweetness of the smells were getting to her, and later on she realized that probably it was just as foolish to come down in broad daylight in France as anywhere, but I guess she was plain lucky. She swooped down as fast as she could behind a low hill, and around it, and suddenly she found herself in a neat little wood, standing on a carpet of grass with flowers growing at her feet. Quick as could be, she unlimbered and got things stowed away in her suitcase. Then she walked into the wood, into sunlight beaming down and golden shadows. She walked for maybe five minutes, listening to the birds singing — and the wood abruptly came to an end.

She found herself in a park, a miniature park, but one as carefully tended as if it surrounded a palace. There was a small marble fountain plashing a few yards away. There was beautifully manicured green grass, and beds of irises and roses and little forget-me-nots and any number of other flowers. Across the park rose a miniature castle, a pocket-size palace. And only a few feet from where she stood, at a fine linen tablecloth spread on the grass, a bearded elderly gentleman and a lovely young lady were having a picnic. The elderly gentleman had been pouring champagne into the young lady's glass. His arm was round her waist, which would have been tiny even without the corset holding the rest of her, which wasn't tiny at all.

"*Oooh!*" gasped Aunt Trivia, recognizing him from his photograph.

He stopped pouring. He stared at her. He frowned. "My good woman, what are you doing here?" he demanded in French. "Don't you know you're trespassing?"

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"Ooooh!" Aunt Trivia repeated. "I — I know who you are, sir — Your Majesty, I reckon it is. You're King Edward, only I've forgotten your number. I — I didn't mean to butt in, but I just flew over from Massachusetts — that's in the U.S. of America — and I — well, I—"

The young lady laughed lightly. "Did you hear her, Bertie? She just *flew* over, and she's one of my countrywomen. Do you suppose she flew on that broom?"

Aunt Trivia had seen the young lady's picture, too, but she couldn't remember her name, though she recalled her being on the stage or something like that and not properly what they'd have called a lady back home.

"Yes, ma'am," she answered. "That's true. I did fly on my broom. I wouldn't of set down here if I'd known about you folks. But I was getting mighty hungry, and everything was so pretty, and the air smelled so good, I figured I just wouldn't wait. Just so you'll know who I am, my name's Trivia Lacklustre, and I'm from Goose Falls."

The king chuckled. "Did you say *Trivia*! Isn't that a rather unusual name?"

"Yes, sir. Everybody in my family thinks it must've been short for something, but none of 'em can remember just what."

He turned to the lady. "Well, Lily," he said, "what do we do about her? Shall we call the servants and have her chucked out?"

Lily patted his hand. "Oh, let's not do that. After all, I know she's telling the truth about being American — she's a real Down East Yankee — no matter how she really did get here. You heard her say she's hungry. Why not tell her to put down her broom and that suitcase and join us? There's lots left, and I'd love to hear her story."

"Lily, I can deny you nothing," laughed Edward VII. "Miss Trivia, will you join us?"

Aunt Trivia allowed as she'd be happy to, and she put her stuff down and took off her hat; and she was surprised to see that the king's face, when he looked at her hair, had exactly the same expression as my old man's used to have. But he himself seated her on the grass. Then he waved away two large Frenchmen who came looming up, and served her a small roasted fowl, which she found delicious, and some caviar, which she ate out of politeness; and while she ate, they listened to her story, pouring more champagne for her every time her glass emptied.

She told them everything, all about buying her broom from Junius

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Brutus at Monkey Ward's, and how he'd sworn it'd never wear out, but that it was getting sort of ragged even though she'd hardly used it at all, and about Iceland and how she'd swooped down on the freighter. All she left out was the sea gull. She got to feeling more and more at home with them as the champagne took effect, and finally, quelling a small burp, she said, "You know, Your Majesty sir, back home we don't hold much with kings, except a few of us who headed up north to Canada when we won, but if we'd had a king like you, Your Majesty sir, I guess maybe we'd still have one."

"That," said the king, "is indeed a pretty compliment, though I must say—" And he smiled at Miss Lily. "—I do seem to get along nicely with some of your compatriots."

Aunt Trivia said nothing, though she was pretty sure the lady was no better than she should be — but he was a king, after all, and they'd both treated her very kindly.

"And what do you plan to do now?" asked Lily.

"Well, I was sort of figuring on sweeping that castle of yours out for you, you feeding me that fine lunch and all."

They thanked her, but assured her it wouldn't be necessary because they had all sorts of servants to do it.

"Then I guess I'll just fly on home. There's no point to my staying away any longer. But you've shown me such a fine time, I don't mind if you watch me take off." She started right in getting out her saddle and stuff. "Only — only you won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Hardly!" exclaimed the king. "I don't want to go down in history as Edward the Mad, like that poor Spanish Juana la Loca."

"Goodness gracious!" said Aunt Trivia. "We wouldn't want *that*."

She got everything rigged up, tied on the scarf good and tight over her hat, shook hands with Lily, did her best to curtsy before His Majesty, and took off straight into the air.

She said that when she turned round to wave back, they were looking at her as if they couldn't believe their own eyes.

She flew straight on home, stopping only in Ireland and Iceland, and not even in Halifax, and the minute she'd unloaded, she had the big bay hitched up and drove down to Salem.

She marched into Monkey Ward's Housewares Department, waving her broom like a battle-ax, and right up to Junius Brutus Badger.

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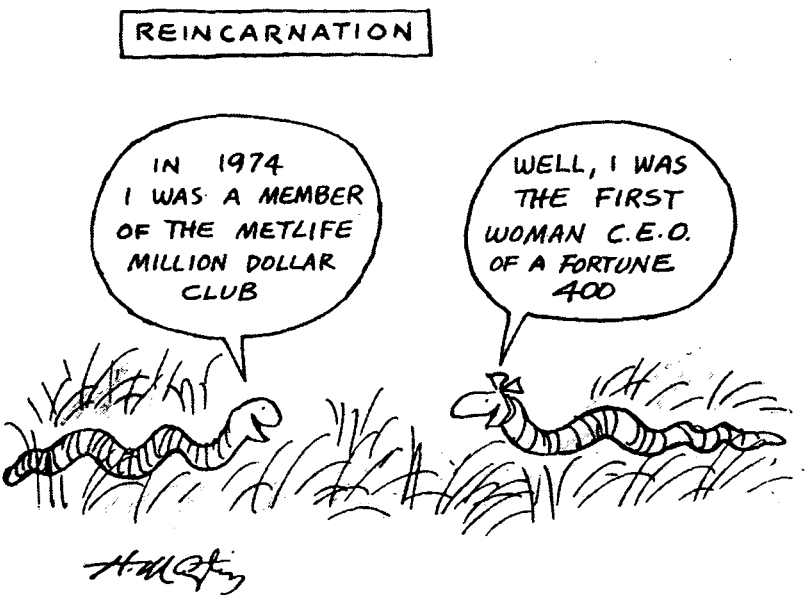
"Look at that, Badger!" she cried, pointing at the bent and broken ends of its straws. "You said it'd last me forever, you did. And you told me it was brand-new." She held it under his nose and pointed at a tiny inscription on the stick just back of the wire binding: *Sufannah Badger, it said, 1687.*

"Brand-new!" she repeated, staring him right in the eye.

Junius Brutus Badger didn't argue. He gave her a new Monkey Ward broom out of stock and didn't charge her a dime.

So Aunt Trivia wasn't just the first person to fly the Atlantic all by herself; she was the first one to fly it both ways, and the first to fly it on a broom — and that's something no one else has done in all the years since then.

I guess they just aren't making brooms the way they used to.



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Vance Aandahl ("Deathmatch in Disneyland," July 1987) tells us that he wrote this story "in hopes of exploring the psychology of fear and showing that fear can so drain us that we are left open to transformation."

In the Light of the Holy Herb

By Vance Aandahl

Distance does not make you falter
now, arriving in magic, flying —
and, finally, insane for the light,
you are the butterfly and you are gone.

— Goethe

THIS IS CRAZY, thought Mark. What have I got myself into? He stared at the speedometer needle as it climbed past sixty.

"Steven," he said, "don't you think you're pushing it? I mean —"

"Aw, just shut the fuck up and enjoy the ride. I know what I'm doing."

Mark cringed as Steven pressed the pedal to the floor. They hurtled ever faster through the darkness, up the winding mountain road at sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five miles per hour. The old Plymouth didn't have any windshield or windows. A steady stream of night air came rushing through it, whipping Mark's long hair and beard

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wildly in all directions, flicking him in the eyes so he couldn't see the road ahead.

Why oh why did I ever agree to go in on such a nutsy deal? This Steven — whoever he is, he's gotta be some kind of lunatic. And I don't even know the other guy's name.

Mark glanced over at the Rastafarian who sat next to him in the passenger seat. The buffeting wind flailed the Rasta man with his own dreadlocks, but his bloodshot eyes appeared imperturbable, unshakably calm, ancient and wise. Either that or he was too high to care.

Faster and faster the old Plymouth accelerated up the incline, screeching on two wheels around the curves, its revved-up engine roaring, its headlights dancing crazily through the dense thickets of tropical foliage on either side of the road. Gravel rattled like buckshot against the undercarriage. Steven eased back on the pedal just enough to take the Plymouth around a hairpin turn without rolling it into the jungle. Immediately the road narrowed, petering out in the middle of a clearing. Mark flinched as Steven stomped on the brake pedal. The Plymouth skidded sideways across the sodden soil and shuddered to a halt in a tangle of greenery.

For a moment the three of them just sat there soaking up the sudden, pervasive silence. The only sound was the faint whine of a mosquito. Protruding into the car through the windshield hole, the tip of a fern frond tickled Mark lightly on the cheek.

"Dis is de place, mon," said the Rasta, his voice soft and melodic. He smiled enigmatically, then slipped out of the car.

Mark's heart was hammering as he followed Steven out the driver's side. He'd met the crewcut young man earlier that evening, back in the Blue Rooster bar in Trenchtown. They'd shared a pint of house rum while they talked. Steven had leaned across the table till his boyish face almost touched Mark's. He'd told Mark in an urgent, confidential, buddy-buddy whisper all about the dope deal he was setting up. Buzzing with rum, Mark had acted on impulse and not only agreed to form a partnership but also gave Steven his half of the money. At the time he'd felt exuberant over his entrepreneurial cleverness. Now he felt like a fool. He was trapped in an ever-worsening predicament, helpless to do anything except tag along and hope for the best. It was too late to back out.

The two of them trailed the Rasta through the moonlight to the opposite side of the clearing. Their shoes made squelching noises in the muck.

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The Rasta stooped down, groped under a bush, and pulled out a big canvas duffel bag.

"Blue Mountain ganja, mon."

He set the duffel bag upright in front of them and knelt to open it. The pungent aroma of marijuana filled Mark's nostrils.

"Dis herb is fresh from de harvest — not like dat dried-out weed you smoke in de States."

"Good shit, huh?" Steven rubbed one hand over his close-cropped bristle of hair and leaned closer to peer into the bag. Mark just stood there, afraid to move, his heart racing with fear and excitement.

"True dat. Ganja is de holy herb. De spirit in de plant is alive. Him cyan reason wit us. Him cyan enlighten us. Him cyan upfill us wit telepatic inspiration from de Almighty Selassie I Rastafari. If de mon who smoke a spliff of ganja love Jah in his heart, den de ganja be pleased and mek dat mon happy."

The Rasta stood up and looked over Steven's shoulder at Mark. He gazed straight into Mark's eyes and gave him a broad, innocent, childlike smile.

"First we tek de ganja and put him in de car. Den you cyan pay I and I."

"We'll pay you, all right." Steven's fingers were trembling. He unzipped his flight jacket and pulled out a pistol. "You dumb nigger."

"No!" cried Mark. "Don't —"

Horrified, he stared at the gun in Steven's hand as it recoiled three times in rapid succession. There was no sound at all. Dimly, Mark deduced the weapon must be equipped with a silencer. Or maybe he'd gone into a state of shock and couldn't hear. But he could see. In the moonlight, three neat black bullet holes had appeared down one side of the Rasta man's ragged Bob Marley T-shirt, and, mystery of mysteries — the man himself only smiled! His bloodshot eyes didn't even blink. They remained imperturbable and calm, ancient and wise.

Steven quailed back, mouth opening to scream. But at last the Rasta's eyelids closed and he toppled to one side, the dead weight of his body hitting the rain-drenched jungle floor with a squishy thud.

"My God . . . ," whispered Mark. "You . . . you killed him. . . ."

"For a fucking slimeball hippie, you catch on quick." Steven sneered and pointed the gun at Mark's head. "Maybe I should waste you, too."

Part of Mark wanted to turn and run. Another part flared with anger.

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"Maybe you should," he snarled. "You lousy, no-good sonofabitch."

Faster than Mark would have thought possible, Steven lunged forward and jabbed the barrel of the gun at his mouth. Mark felt his lip split, a tooth shatter, a lancet of pain shoot up through his gums and explode in his forehead. He staggered back, bending over at the waist, fumbling at his face with both hands. His fingers felt wet. Numbly, he pulled his hands away from his mouth and looked down at them. His hands were smeared with blood. He held them cupped to catch more blood as it fell from his lips and dribbled off his beard.

"On the ground, slimeball. *Now!*"

Mouth throbbing, head spinning, Mark sank to his hands and knees.

"Down all the way, slimeball — on your *stomach!*"

The voice sounded metallic and unreal in Mark's ears. He hesitated. Something struck him in the side, knocking him face-first into the muck.

Oh my God! He shot me! He *shot* me!

"O.K., slimeball, just lie there flat. That's right. Now pull your arms in *under* your body and keep 'em there."

"You know what I want you to do now, slimeball? I want you to reach down and grab your balls and hold on to 'em tight, *real* tight, because I don't like hippies, slimeball — I've *never* liked hippies, especially *old* hippies — and if you so much as move a fraction of an inch, if you even *breathe* hard, I'm gonna blow your fucking brains out."

Mark's mouth had gone numb, but the pain in his side was excruciating. He gritted his teeth and tried to lie still. Concentrating on the pain, he decided it must have been caused not by a bullet but by a hard kick in the rib cage. One or two of his ribs might be cracked, but he hadn't been shot. Not yet.

"Let me tell you something, slimeball. With all that scummy hair, you look like some kind of goddamn filthy animal. If I wanna look at the animals, I'll go to a zoo — I don't need no fucking hippies." Steven's voice gurgled and hissed with hate, rising in pitch. "I bet you assfuck your dog, slimeball. I bet you pick your nose and eat it. I bet you roll your shit up into little balls and play with 'em, don't you. Don't you, don't you, *don't you!*"

God help me, thought Mark. With a cold rush of terror, he comprehended fully what Steven was doing. It had been relatively easy for Steven to kill the Rasta because the Rasta was just a Jamaican, a black, a zero in

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the killer's warped hierarchy of values. But to murder Mark wouldn't be so easy. Mark was an American, and a white man, too. Before Steven could pull the trigger, he'd have to work himself into a psychotic frenzy, and he was doing that by hurling obscenities at his victim.

"Please . . . please don't kill me. . . ."

Mark spoke in a hoarse, pathetic whisper. Panic had constricted his voice box.

"I won't tell anybody. . . . I promise I won't. . . ."

He hated himself for begging. It was the lowest thing he'd ever done. But he couldn't prevent the words from squeaking out.

"Please . . . I don't want to die. . . ."

He couldn't go on — his jaw had locked. Through his clenched teeth, he sobbed and whimpered like a baby. Involuntarily, his hands curled into claws, raking deep into the mud. All the muscles in his body contracted, tightening till he felt like a piece of metal being subjected to a pressure test. To his astonishment, he realized he was literally paralyzed with fear. If he tensed up any more, his spine would snap.

He heard Steven chuckling. The little metal mouth of the gun pressed harder against his scalp. Suddenly a loud buzz sounded inside his head, growing in volume, droning in his ears, drowning out the sound of Steven's demented chuckle and plunging Mark into darkness. At the last moment the shrinking window of his conscious mind identified the buzz — it was the same noise you hear when you stand up too fast from a squatting position and make yourself pass out.

Somewhere an engine roared. Mark's mind came spinning up out of the darkness. He guessed he'd been unconscious for only a short time, twenty or thirty seconds, perhaps a minute at the most. With a groan, he struggled to lift his head and look around.

Through a swimming blur of moonlight, he saw the old Plymouth back out of the ferns on the far side of the clearing. Steven sat in the driver's seat. As he turned the junker around, he rubbed his crew cut and leered at Mark.

"Good luck explaining this to the Kingston cops, slimeball."

With a shout of laughter, he revved up the engine and gunned the Plymouth across the clearing, driving it straight over the Rasta's body. Mark saw the duffel bag full of ganja bounce up and down in the backseat.

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Twisting his head, he watched the taillights shudder and lurch down the road out of sight.

For a while he just lay there on his stomach, too weak to get up. Finally, he struggled to his feet and stared blankly off in the direction the car had departed.

That bastard. By the time I report this, he'll be out of the country. I don't even know whether Steven's his real name. I'll wind up getting blamed for the murder, and he knows it.

Mark's upper lip felt like it had swollen to the size of a golf ball. Stabs of pain shot up from his broken tooth into his sinuses. Blood and dirt had bedraggled his beard. His rib cage throbbed with a horrible ache.

Gingerly, he turned around and surveyed the clearing. There lay the Rasta, flat on his back, his body partially embedded in the mud, pressed down by the passage of the Plymouth.

Mark walked across the clearing and knelt beside the Rasta. Moonlight illuminated the black man's face. His features were composed, almost serene. He looked like a supine saint. He'd been at peace with himself and the world when he died, and too little time had passed for rigor mortis to pull his mouth back into a sardonic grin.

Mark leaned closer. The Rasta's lips appeared to part. His nostril hairs trembled. Was it just Mark's imagination, or was the man's chest rising and sinking, moving almost imperceptibly up and down with shallow inhalations?

Holy shit! He's still alive! What am I gonna do now?

Mark stood up, crossed the clearing, and started down the road, walking as fast as the pain in his side would allow. Gotta hurry, he told himself. Gotta find a doctor or a nurse or somebody who can help the poor guy. Briskly, his legs carried him down the road away from the Rasta.

Who are you kidding? You're not going to look for help. What you want to do is hustle back down the mountain to your hotel room and pack your bags and get the hell out of Jamaica before anyone asks you any questions. You're running so you won't get caught, just like Steven. There's a man back there who's dying, but you don't care. You're too scared to stay and try to help him. Steven's right. You're a slimeball.

He willed himself to stop. He stood there in the darkness, not knowing what to do. His legs shivered. The cowardice inside him was like a physical force. He felt it straining inside his muscles, compelling him to rush

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away from danger. The only thing that held him back was an image in his mind — the floating moonlit memory of the Rasta's face.

I can't just leave him there. He needs help, and he needs it right now.

With a shiver, Mark turned around and retraced his steps. He stood over the Rasta, staring down in helpless confusion at that saintly face.

So what am I supposed to do? He's been shot in the chest. He's been run over by a car. I never learned anything about first aid in my whole life. I'm a complete idiot on the subject. I don't even know how to put on a goddamn bandage.

Mark crouched down next to the Rasta. He had no idea how to proceed. An urge to leap up and run away surged through him, and he struggled to control it. Do something, he told himself. Instead, he hesitated, hating himself for being so fearful, so incompetent, so totally incapable of action.

Finally, he willed himself to work his hands under the Rasta's back and pry the man up from the muck he was stuck in. The Rasta groaned when Mark hoisted his chest. Mark groaned, too, then peeled up the blood-soaked Bob Marley T-shirt to inspect the man's gunshot wounds.

There were three of them, all right, just as he remembered. The holes ran up the left side of the Rasta's chest, far enough off-center to have missed his heart.

His left lung must be torn to shreds. I wonder — are there any other vital organs on the left side of a person's chest? The spleen, maybe? Or the kidneys or the liver or something.

The Rasta's eyelids opened slowly. Solemnly, he gazed at Mark's face. Then his eyelids closed again. He took a breath with a soft burbling noise, and a froth of blood bubbles trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Mark stood up and looked wildly around. The clearing wasn't very large. Dense jungle enclosed it on all sides.

Some farmers or somebody must live up here. Otherwise why would there be a road? Maybe there's even somebody who has a phone or can tell me how to get to one quick.

He circled the clearing. On the far side of the road, he found the start of a path. He ventured a few steps up the path, cupped his hands around his mouth, drew air into his lungs till the ache in his rib cage stopped him, then shouted as loudly as he could: "Help!" It came out at half the volume he wanted — an insubstantial squeak of a shout. His larynx was still tight,

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I've been walking around with a gunshot wound, and I didn't even know it.

not only from the terror he'd felt a few minutes ago, but also from a new fear, the fear that by crying for help, he would attract someone even worse than Steven.

Don't be so goddamn paranoid, he told himself. He took another breath and shouted "Help!" again. This time his voice sounded even weaker.

For a long time he stood as still as possible, listening for a reply. He heard the clickety-clack of a flying beetle, and a noise that sounded like the croak of a frog. Mosquitoes whined around a puddle on one side of the clearing. But otherwise the jungle was silent.

He tried once more, shouting the same message over and over again, up the path and in other directions, too: "Help! Someone's hurt! We need a doctor!" Each time he filled his lungs, the sore spot in his rib cage hurt worse. Each time he shouted, his voice sounded thinner and hoarser, and the great darkness around him refused to answer.

Finally, the pain of an especially deep inhalation made him choke. Instead of shouting, he reached down with both hands to hold them like a compress against his sore ribs. But when he touched the spot, the pain screamed through his body, sharp and agonizing, and his knees nearly buckled.

Look at your fingers. In the moonlight they glistened with moisture. He held them close to his eyes to make sure.

That's fresh blood. I'm wounded down there. A kick wouldn't make me bleed. Not even a hard kick. Steven must have shot me, just like I thought. My God, he really did. I've been walking around with a gunshot wound, and I didn't even know it. How bad is it? I'm not gonna die, am I?

He didn't feel like he was dying. The wound hurt like hell, but he knew it had to be superficial. The bullet must have just grazed his side, ripping open the skin and fracturing a rib or two, but not penetrating deeply.

You're going to be O.K., he told himself. Just calm down and try to think clearly. You've gotta figure out what to do.

He walked back to the center of the clearing and knelt next to the Rasta. The man was still breathing. Mark arose and turned slowly around, studying the perimeter of the clearing. It occurred to him now that shouting for help had been a silly thing to do. The surrounding jungle was too

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impenetrable, too wild — surely no one lived anywhere within shouting distance of the clearing. Probably the path had been made by animals, not men. And the road? Whatever purpose it once had served, the road was now defunct. For all he knew, it had been abandoned years ago. During their ride up the mountain, the last mile or so hadn't looked or felt like a road at all, more like a trail of ruts that the jungle had encroached upon and would soon overgrow.

He walked to the downhill side of the clearing and stared at the road. How far would he have to walk down it before he could find somebody? He remembered seeing some roadside shacks just below the switchbacks, but how far was that?

Desperate with indecision, he walked back to the center of the clearing. He glanced down at the Rasta, then up again, searching the tropical gloom for a solution, then down again. He looked hard at the Rasta. Probing his broken tooth with the tip of his tongue, he wondered what to do. With a start, he realized he was wringing his hands together like a fretful mother. His tongue touched an exposed nerve, and the tooth screeched with pain. A pulse of nausea rippled through his body, dizzying him. He stared at the Rasta.

You can carry him down the mountain. You can carry him down till you come to one of those shacks. It's the poor guy's only chance.

Mark stooped down and grabbed the Rasta under the armpits. But when he pulled up, the wound in his side exploded like a bomb. He screamed and dropped the Rasta. Bent over in a hunched position, he waited for the pain to subside.

You idiot! You absolute idiot!

Finally, the fire in his ribs died down. With infinite caution, he straightened his back and stood upright. He wiped away the tears from his eyes, wishing he could just as easily wipe away forty ruinous years of dissipation, ennui, and despair and start his life over again. Wouldn't it be great to be a kid again, to be back home in Omaha going to high school and griping about his parents and saving up his allowance for Friday night dates. What a waste he'd made of his life since then.

Suddenly he heard something. At least he thought he heard something. He couldn't be sure, but it sounded like voices murmuring in the distance. They ebbed at the edge of stillness. Then he couldn't hear them at all.

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Slowly, he walked across the clearing to the path and stood there straining to pick up the voices. When at last he heard them again, almost subliminally, they seemed even farther away.

By God, there really *are* people up here! But it sounds like they're heading off in the wrong direction.

"Help! We're down here! We're hurt!"

The words came croaking out of his throat in a raspy whisper. He wanted to shout, but couldn't. His rib cage hurt too much, and his larynx wouldn't cooperate.

No one's gonna hear that pitiful squawk. What you gotta do is go up there after them. And you better do it quick, right now, before they get too far away.

He started up the path. The foliage formed a canopy overhead, shutting out most of the moonlight, making it difficult to see where he was going. After a minute or two, the path narrowed. The darkness closed in around him, and he came to a halt.

This is crazy. What if I get lost?

But then he heard the voices again, somewhere above him on the slope. They still sounded faint, but not so far away as before. This time he discerned a melody of tiny variations in volume, tone, and cadence, and guessed there must be at least three or four speakers engaged in a lively conversation.

Who are they? What if I take them back to the clearing and they don't believe my story? What if they decide *I* shot the Rasta? What if they're his friends and he dies? They might kill me. They really might.

His legs shook. Trying to save the Rasta was pointless. The man didn't have a chance. One of his lungs was torn apart. He was drowning in his own blood. It made so much more sense for Mark to just turn around and hike back down the path and down the road, too, all the way back to his hotel room, where he could shower and change clothes and take a taxi to the airport and catch the next flight back to the States.

Why the hell should I risk getting murdered? Or worse yet, getting stuck in some filthy Jamaican jail for the rest of my life? I haven't done anything wrong.

Not knowing which way to go, he stood there and listened to the voices above him on the mountain. There was a lilting rhythm to their conversation, a kind of gentle music in it.

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C'mon, Mark. It may be a long shot, but trying to save that Rasta is the only really decent thing you've ever done. You can't quit now.

With a new surge of determination, he forged up the path, pushing aside the fern fronds, squishing his way across beds of wet moss, stepping over knotty tangles of roots, moving steadily but slowly enough to keep the wound in his side from screaming with pain. Each time he paused, he could hear the voices more clearly — men's voices, or so it seemed — six or seven of them flowing lyrically together in what now sounded more like a chant or a litany than an ordinary conversation.

Whoever they are, they must be performing some sort of ceremony or something. There aren't any primitive tribes in Jamaica, are there? Mark pictured a big black stewpot surrounded by cannibals with tattooed cheeks and sharpened teeth, then hurled the absurd cartoon image out of his mind. You dummy! Where do you think you are, anyway — in a Tarzan comic book?

He rounded a big tree stump with fungi growing on it, ascended an embankment, then found himself standing on level ground. There were no trees here to block the moonlight. A multitude of leafy plants surrounded him, each one about eight feet tall. A rich odor flooded his nostrils. He looked more closely at one of the plants, and immediately recognized the familiar pattern of its foliage, the slender elliptical leaves arranged in groups of five, the lush abundance of flower buds ready to burst into blossom.

Ganja. A whole flipping field of ganja. I'll be damned.

He wasn't close enough to make out what they were saying, but he could hear the voices clearly now. One voice was doing most of the talking, while the others responded with brief but frequent interjections.

To approach the voices, Mark would have to penetrate the stand of ganja. There was no path to follow. Using both hands to protect his face from branches, he plunged into the dense vegetation. In places the growth was so thick he felt like he was squeezing through a hedge. If it got any thicker, he'd need a machete.

This isn't a cultivated field. The plants are too close together. It's a jungle — a whole goddamn natural jungle of pot.

As he pushed his way through the tangle of overlapping branches, clouds of pollen floated up from the flower buds, tickling his nose and irritating his eyes. He suppressed an urge to sneeze.

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What a smell! The female plants must be at the very peak of their potency.

As he pressed on, he saw a zillion motes of moonlit pollen drifting in the air around him. He could taste them on his tongue, feel them coating the inside of his nostrils each time he inhaled. They stuck to the film of sweat on his skin. But most of all they filled his head with a cloyingly rich and giddy aroma.

He recalled reading in a book on how to grow marijuana that in Algeria when the workers harvest kef, they have to wrap scarves around their faces to keep from inhaling the pollen. If a worker takes off his scarf, he becomes stupendously high — so high he forgets where he is and what he's doing, so high he lies down and goes to sleep on the job, so high, so high, so high he was floating free, floating like the pollen, drifting in and out of soft beams of moonlight filtering down through the layers of leaves in lazy arabesques and swirls, enveloping him in a tremulous silver sea of illumination, and yes, it was true, he'd been smoking joints for thirty years but never before had he gotten so high so fast, and he kept getting higher, kept going up and up and up, each new breath rushing through his lungs into his bloodstream up to his brain like a tidal wave of psychedelic energy.

He took a step, and it seemed to last forever. He was acutely conscious of the way his foot lifted off the ground and swung forward. Every microscopic increment in the biomechanical action of walking revealed itself to him in ultra slow motion.

During his next step, his eyes focused on a single ganja leaf at the tip of a branch. He scrutinized the blade of the leaf, the glitter of resin on its surface, the lacework design of its petiole and veins, the delicacy of its serrated edges, and it seemed that all the secrets of floral engineering, the mysteries of photosynthesis and transpiration, were his to understand in a moment of divine revelation.

During his next step, he let his eyes zoom in for a close-up of another leaf. It came looming up at him out of the darkness: enormous, menacing, sheeny and metallic with lights like a George Lucas spaceship, perhaps an intergalactic Maori war canoe; or maybe it was just a big bronze sculpture gone green with verdigris, an abstract expressionist sculpture just sitting there in the living room of his mind.

During his next step, he saw them all, thousands of the little green

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things looking back at him, but he couldn't remember what they were, or where he was, or what he was doing, or even who he was. He felt like a moth or a breeze or some disembodied consciousness moving steadily deeper into an alien dreamworld, drawn inexorably forward by the voices of the beings who lived there.

The stalks thinned and parted, and he stepped out into an open space, a clearing. A long time ago he'd stood in another clearing, but he couldn't remember anything about it now. Now there was only *this* clearing, and in the middle of it, eight black men sat around a fitful campfire. They'd let their hair and beards grow naturally into soft, ropy dreadlocks. Some of them wore white cotton undershirts with faded blue jeans and leather sandals, others khaki work shirts with checkered trousers, still others long-sleeved shirts unbuttoned to the waist with pants striped in the African colors, red and green and black. One man tended a little cooking pot by the side of the fire. Another tapped lightly on a drum. A third stood with a book in his hand. He was older than the others and wore a flag with a lion on it wrapped around his chest. He opened the book and read aloud.

"And Jah said, Let de eart bring fort grass, de herb yielding seed: and it was so. And de eart brought fort grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind . . . and Jah saw dat it was good."

They passed the bamboo chillum, and smoke billowed up from the bowl of the pipe till it veiled their faces. He stood on the other side of the clearing and watched them. He knew who they were. They were his friends, his brothers: Ras Michael and Ras Kwame and Ras Daryl, Bongo Syl and Bongo Jonathon and Bongo Saint-I McLean, Rasta Herbert and Iya Mortimer.

Yes, he knew them, and now he remembered who he was, too, and why he was there. The sudden return of self made him feel light and airy, as though some great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. His side-ache was gone. Gone, too, was his fear. He came forth into the clearing, walking slowly and confidently toward them. One by one they turned their heads and greeted him with smiles and warm words:

"Peace, Rasta."

"Love, Rasta."

Peace and love, Rasta."

"Praises due Selassie I."

"Dread, Rasta."

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"Welcome fort, bredder."

"Irie, bredder."

"Irie, Ras Marcus."

Yes, now he remembered who he was and what they'd sent him to do and how he had failed. He knew they would forgive him. He'd not brought back the money they'd hoped for, the agreed-upon price for the bag of ganja, but money was of no great importance. All that really mattered was that he had returned safely to be with his brothers again on the site of the Holy Grounation.

He smiled sheepishly down at the picture of Bob Marley on his T-shirt, then held out his thin black arms, palms up, to show them he'd come back empty-handed.

"Dat crazy baldhead," he explained. "Him pull a gun on I and I and tek de ganja without no pay for it."

"Seen," said Iya Mortimer.

They handed him the chillum. He drew deeply on it, filling his lungs with smoke from the holy herb. It washed away the evil that had touched him. It cleansed his soul. He smiled and sat down on the ground. The cooking pot was giving off a delicious aroma of lentils, peas, and porridge. He was glad to be with his brethren again, glad to be home.

Coming Soon

Some exceptional stories from old contributors and new. In the former category: a new Kedrigern story by John Morressy, a powerful new fantasy, "Serenity," by Nancy Springer, plus new stories from Avram Davidson, Lucius Shepard, Ian Watson and George Alec Effinger. Some fine stories coming along from new writers like Elizabeth Moon, Robert Reed, Ray Aldridge, Kim Antieau and R. Garcia y Robertson.

Use the coupon on page 158; it protects you from any price increases.

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This new story by Ray Bradbury shares some characteristics of his early work. It is a short, polished chiller set in a small midwest town. The story will be included in a new Bradbury collection, THE TOYNBEE CONVECTION, to be published by Knopf.

The Thing at the Top of the Stairs

By Ray Bradbury

HE WAS BETWEEN trains.

He had got off in Chicago only to find that there was a four hour waitover.

He thought about heading for the Museum; the Renoirs and Monets had always held his eyes and touched his mind. But he was restless. The taxicab line outside the station made him blink.

Why not? he thought, grab a cab and taxi thirty miles north, spend an hour in his old home town, then bid it farewell for the second time in his life, and ease back south to train out for New York, happier and perhaps wiser?

Much money for a few hours' whim, but what the hell. He opened a cab door, slung his suitcase in, and said:

"Green Town and return!"

The driver broke into a splendid smile and flipped the meter-flag, even as Emil Cramer leaped into the backseat and slammed the door.

Green Town, he thought, and—

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The Thing at the Top of the Stairs.

What!?

My God, he thought, what made me remember *that* on a fine spring afternoon?

And they drove north, with clouds that followed, to stop on Green Town's Main Street at three o'clock. He got out, gave the taxi driver fifty dollars as security, told him to wait, and looked up.

The marquee on the old Genesee Theatre, in blood-red letters said: TWO CHILLERS. MANIAC HOUSE. DR. DEATH. COME IN. BUT DON'T TRY TO LEAVE.

No, no, thought Cramer. The Phantom was better. When I was six, all he had to do was stiffen, whirl, gape and point down into the camera with his ghastly face. *That* was terror!

I wonder, he thought, was it the Phantom then, plus the Hunchback, plus the Bat that made all of my childhood nights miserable?

And, walking through the town, he gave a quiet laugh of remembrance. . . .

How his mother would give him a look over the morning cornflakes: what *happened* during the night? did you *see* it? was it *there*, up in the *dark*? how *tall*, what *color*? did you manage not to scream *this* time, to wake your father? what, *what*?

While his father, from around the cliff of his newspaper, eyed them both, and glanced at the leather strop hung near the kitchen washstand, itching to be used.

And he, Emil Cramer, six years old, would sit there, remembering the stabbing pain in his small crayfish loins if he did not make it upstairs in time, past the Monster Beast lurking in the attic midnight of the house, shrieking at the last instant to fall back down like a panicked dog or scorched cat, to lie crushed and blind at the bottom of the stair, wailing:

Why? Why is it there? Why am I being punished? What have I done?

And crawling, creeping away in the dark hall to fumble back to bed and lie in agonies of bursting fluid, praying for dawn, when the Thing might stop waiting for him and sift into the stained wallpaper or suck into the cracks under the attic door.

Once he had tried to hide a chamberpot under the bed. Discovered, it was thrown and shattered. Once, he had run water in the kitchen sink, and tried to use it, but his father's radio ears, tuned, heard, and he rose in a shouting fury.

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Yes, yes, he said, and he walked through the town on a day becoming storm-colored. He reached the street on which he had once lived. The sun turned off. The sky was all winter dusk. He gasped.

For a single drop of cold rain struck his nose.

"Lord!" he laughed. "There it *is*. My house!"

And it was empty and a FOR SALE sign stood out by the sidewalk.

There was the white clapboard front, with a large porch to one side and a smaller one out front. There was the front door and, beyond, the parlor where he had lain on the foldout bed with his brother, sweating the night hours, as everyone else slept and dreamed. And to the right, the dining room and the door which led to the hall and the stairs that moved up into eternal night.

He moved up the walk toward the side porch door.

The Thing, now, what shape had it been, and color and size? Did it have a smoking face, and grotto teeth and hellfire burning Baskerville eyes? Did it ever whisper or murmur or moan—?

He shook his head.

After all, the Thing had never really existed, *had* it?

Which was exactly why his father's teeth had splintered every time he stared at his gutless wonder of a son! Couldn't the child see that the hall was empty, *empty*!? Didn't the damned boy know that it was his own nightmare movie machine, locked in his head, that flashed those snowfalls of dread up through the night to melt on the terrible air?

Thump-*whack!* His father's knuckles cracked his brow to exorcise the ghost. Whack-*thump*!

Emil Cramer snapped his eyes wide, surprised to find he had shut them. He stepped up on the small side porch.

He touched the doorknob.

My God! he thought.

For the door, unlocked, was drifting quietly open.

The house and the dark hall lay empty and waiting.

He pushed. The door drifted further in, with the merest sigh of its hinges.

The same night that had hung there like funeral-parlor curtains, still filled the coffin-narrow hall. It smelled with rains from other years, and was filled with twilights that had come to visit and never gone away. . . .

He stepped in.

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Instantly, outside, rain fell. The downpour shut off the world. The downpour drenched the porch floorboards and drowned his breathing.

He took another step into complete night.

No light burned at the far end of the hall, three steps up—

Yes! That had been the problem!

To save money, the damned bulb was *never* left burning!

In order to scare the Thing off, you had to run, leap up, grab the chain and yank the light *on!*

So, blind and battering walls, you jumped. But could never find the chain!

Don't look up! you thought. If you see *It,* and it sees *You!* No. No!

But then your head jerked. You looked. You screamed!

For the dark Thing was lurching out on the air to slam flat down like a tomb-lid on your scream!

"Anyone *home*. . . ?" he called, softly.

A damp wind blew from above. A smell of cellar earths and attic dusts touched his cheeks.

"Ready or not," he whispered. "Here I *come.*"

Behind him, slowly, softly, the front door drifted, hushed, and slid itself *shut.*

He froze.

Then he forced himself to take another step and another.

And, Christ! it seemed he felt himself . . . shrinking. Melting an inch at a time, sinking into smallness, even as the flesh on his face diminished, and his suit and shoes became too large. . . .

What am I *doing* here? he thought. What do I *need*?

Answers. Yes. That was it. Answers.

His right shoe touched. . . .

The bottom of the stairs.

He gasped. His foot jerked back. Then, slowly, he forced it to touch the step again.

Easy. Just don't look up, he thought.

Fool! he thought, that's why you're here. The stairs. And the top of the stairs. That's *it!*

Now. . . .

Very quietly, he lifted his head.

To stare at the dark light-bulb sunk in its dead-white socket, six feet above his head.

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It was as far off as the Moon.

His fingers twitched.

Somewhere in the walls of the house, his mother turned in her sleep, his brother lay strewn in the pale winding-sheets, his father stopped up his snores to — *listen.*

Quick! Before he *wakes.* Jump!

With a terrible grunt he flung himself up. His foot struck the third step. His hand seized out to yank the light-chain *there. Yank!* And there *again.*

Dead! Oh, Christ. No light. Dead! Like all the lost years.

The chain snaked from his fingers. His hand fell.

Night. Dark.

Outside, cold rain fell behind a shut mine-door.

He blinked his eyes open, shut, open, shut, as if the blink might yank the chain, pull the light *on!* His heart banged not only in his chest, but hammered under his arms and in his aching groin.

He swayed. He toppled.

No, he cried silently. Free yourself. Look! *See!*

And at last he turned his head to look up and up at darkness shelved on darkness.

"Thing. . . ?" he whispered. "*Are* you there?"

The house shifted like an immense scale, under his weight.

High in the midnight air a black flag, a dark banner furled unfurled its funeral skirts, its whispering crepe.

Outside, he thought, *remember!* it is a *spring* day.

Rain tapped the door behind him, quietly.

"Now," he whispered.

And balanced between the cold, sweating stairwell walls, he began to climb.

"I'm at the fourth step," he whispered.

"Now I'm at the fifth. . . ."

"Sixth! You *hear,* up There!?"

Silence. Darkness.

"Christ!!" he thought, run, jump, fall out in the rain, the light —!

No!

"Seventh! Eighth."

The hearts throbbed under his arm, between his legs.

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"Tenth—"

His voice trembled. He took a deep breath and—

Laughed! God, yes! *Laughed*!

It was like smashing glass. His fear shattered, fell away.

"Eleven!!!" he cried. "Twelve!!" he shouted. "Thirteen!!" he hooted. "Damn you! Hell, oh God, hell, yes, hell! And fourteen!"

Why hadn't he thought of this before, age six!? Just leap up, shouting laughs, to kill that Thing forever!?

"Fifteen!" he snorted, and almost brayed with delight.

A final wondrous jump.

"Sixteen!"

He landed. He could not stop laughing.

He thrust his fist straight out in the solid dark cold air.

The laughter froze, his shout choked in his throat.

He sucked in winter night.

Why! a child's voice echoed from far off below in another time. Why am I being punished? What have I *done*?

His heart stopped, then let go.

His groin convulsed. A gunshot of scalding water burst forth to stream hot and shocking down his legs.

"No!" he shrieked.

For his fingers had touched something. . . .

It was the Thing at the top of the stairs.

It was wondering where he had been.

It had been waiting all these long years. . . .

For him to come home.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE LONGEST RIVER

ONE WAY of achieving an act of creativity is to look at something in an unexpected way.

Thus, for thousands of years, the hole in the needle was put at the blunt end, so that the thread followed like a long tail after the needle had pierced the cloth. But when people tried to invent a sewing machine, nothing worked until Elias Howe had the brilliant turn-about idea of putting the hole near the point of the needle.

We who write science fiction find a particular necessity in looking at things differently, for we must deal with societies other than those that exist. A society that looks at everything in the same way we do is not a different society. After nearly half a century of science fiction writing, that sort of sideways squint has therefore become second nature to me.

Thus, at a meeting over which I was presiding a couple of weeks ago, a member rose to introduce his two guests.

He said, "Let me introduce, first, Mr. John Doe, who is a brilliant lawyer and an absolute expert in bridge. Let me also introduce Dr. Richard Roe, who is a great psychiatrist and a past master at poker." He then smiled bashfully, and said, "So you see where my interest lies."

Whereupon I said, quite automatically, "Yes, in working up lawsuits against psychotics," and brought the house down.

But to get to the point—

More than twenty years ago, I wrote an essay on the great rivers of the world ["Old Man River," F&SF, November 1966]. Ever since then, I've had it in my mind to devote an entire essay to just one river. Naturally, it would have to be the largest river of them all, the one that drains the great territory, the one that delivers the most water to the sea, the one that is so mighty that all other rivers are merely rivulets

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compared to it. The river I speak of is, of course, the Amazon.

Now the time has come, and even as I sat down, with satisfaction, to write the essay, the kaleidoscope I call my mind suddenly heaved, rattled, and changed shape. I thought: Why should I be impressed merely by size, by gigantism? Why shouldn't I devote myself to a river that has done most for humanity?

And which should that be but the Nile?

In one respect, the Nile *is* an example of gigantism. It is much smaller than the Amazon in that it delivers far less water to the sea, but it is *longer* than the Amazon. It is, indeed, the longest river in the world, for it is 6,736 kilometers (4,187 miles) long compared to a length of about 6,400 kilometers (4,000 miles) for the Amazon, which is second longest.

The difference between them is that the Amazon flows west to east along the equator, through the largest rain forest in the world. It is constantly being rained on and has, in addition, a dozen tributaries that are mighty rivers in their own right. By the time it reaches the Atlantic, then, it is delivering some 200,000 cubic meters (7,000,000 cubic feet) of water per second, and its outflow can be detected over 300 kilometers (200 miles) out into the sea. The Nile, on the other hand, flows south to north, beginning in tropical Africa, but with its northern half flowing through the Sahara Desert without tributaries, so that it receives no water at all, but merely evaporates. No wonder it finally discharges into the Mediterranean only a small fraction of the water discharged by the mighty Amazon.

But the Sahara was not always a desert region. Twenty thousand years ago, glaciers covered much of Europe, and cool winds brought moisture to northern Africa. What is now desert was then a pleasant land with rivers and lakes, forests and grassland. Human beings, as yet uncivilized, roamed the area and left behind their stone tools.

Gradually, however, as the glaciers retreated and the cool winds drifted ever farther north year by year, the climate of north Africa grew hotter and drier. Droughts came and slowly grew worse. Plants died and animals retreated to regions that were still wet enough to support them. Human beings retreated also, many toward the Nile which, in that long distant time, was a wider river, one that snaked lazily through the broad areas of marsh and swamp and delivered far more water to the Mediterranean. Indeed, the valley of the Nile was not at all an inviting place for human occupancy until after it had

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dried out somewhat.

When the Nile was still too wet and swampy to be entirely enticing, there was a lake that existed to its west, about 210 kilometers (130 miles) south of the Mediterranean. In later times, this body of water came to be called Lake Moeris by the Greeks. It existed as a last reminder of a northern Africa that had once been much better watered than it was in later times. There were hippopotami in Lake Moeris and other, smaller game. From 4500 to 4000 B.C., flourishing villages of the late Stone Age lined its shores.

The lake suffered, however, from the continued drying out of the land. As its level fell, and the animal life it supported grew sparser, the villages along its shore withered. At the same time, though, population grew along the nearby Nile, which became more manageable.

By 3000 B.C., Lake Moeris could only exist in decent size if it were somehow connected with the Nile and was able to draw water from the river. It required increasing exertion, however, to keep the ditch between the two dredged and working.

The battle to do so was finally lost and the lake is now almost gone. In its place is a depression, mostly dry, at the bottom of which is a shallow body of water, now called Birket Qarun. It is about 50 kilometers (30 miles) long west to east and 8 kilometers (5 miles) long north to south. Near the shores of this last remnant of old Lake Moeris is the city of El Fayum that gives its name to the entire depression.

To go on to the next stop requires a small digression—

In 8000 B.C., human beings the world over were hunters and gatherers, as they had been for ages. The total population of the Earth may then have been only 8,000,000, or about as many people as there are in New York City today.

But at about that time, some people in what is now called the Middle East learned how to plan for the future where food was concerned.

Instead of hunting animals and killing them on the spot, human beings kept some alive, cared for them, encouraged them to breed, and killed a few, now and then, for food. They also got milk, eggs, wool, skins, and even work, out of them.

Again, instead of just gathering what plant food they came across, human beings learned to sow plants and care for them, so that eventually they could be harvested and eaten. Clearly, a human being could sow a much greater concentration of edible plants than he was likely to find in a state of nature.

By herding animals and farming plants, groups of human beings vast-

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ly increased their food supply, and their population grew rapidly. Increasing population meant that more plants could be grown and more animals cared for so that, in general, there was a surplus of food, something that never happened (except for brief periods immediately after a large kill) in the old hunting and gathering days.

This meant that not everyone had to labor at growing food. Some could make pottery and exchange it for food. Some could be metal workers. Some could be tellers of tales. In short people could begin to specialize, and society began to gain variety and sophistication.

Of course, farming had its penalty. As long as one merely hunted and gathered, one could avoid conflict. If a stronger band encroached on a tribe's territory, it could prudently retreat to some safer place. Not much was lost in the process. The tribe only owned what it could carry and they would take that along.

Farmers, however, owned land, and that was immovable. If marauding bands, intent on stealing the farmers' food stores, swooped down, the farmers had no choice but to fight. To retreat and give up their farms would mean starvation since there were now too many of them to be supported by any means other than farming.

This meant that farmers had to band together, for in union there was strength. Their houses were built in clusters. They would choose some site with a good natural water supply and surround their houses by a wall for security. They then had what we would today call a "city" (from the Latin "civis"). The inhabitants of cities are "citizens," and the kind of social system in which cities are prevalent is called "civilization."

In a city in which first hundreds and then thousands of human beings clustered, it would be difficult to live without people stepping all over each other. Rules for living had to be set up. Priests had to be appointed to make those rules, and kings to enforce them. Soldiers had to be trained to fight off marauders. (See how easily we recognize the coming of civilization.)

It is hard to tell now just exactly where agriculture got its very first start. Possibly this was on the borders of the modern nations of Iraq and Iran (the very border over which both nations have been fighting a useless war for eight years).

One reason for supposing that area was the place where farming (or agriculture, as it is commonly called) began, is that barley and wheat grow wild there, and it is just those plants that lend themselves to cultivation.

There is a site called Jarmo in

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northern Iraq that was uncovered in 1948. The remains of an old city were found there, revealing the foundations of houses built of thin walls of packed mud and divided into small rooms. The city may have held from 100 to 300 people. In the lowest and oldest layer, dating back to 8000 B.C., the evidence of very early farming was uncovered.

Once discovered, of course, the techniques for agriculture spread out slowly from the original center.

What was needed for farming, first and foremost, was water. Jarmo is at the edge of a mountain range, where rising air cools and where the water vapor it holds condenses out as rain. However, even at best, rain can be unreliable, and a dry year will mean a lean harvest and hunger, if not starvation.

A supply of water that is more dependable than rain is provided by a river. For that reason, farms and cities grew up along the banks of rivers, and civilization began to center there.

The nearest rivers to the original farming communities are the twin rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates in what is modern Iraq, and this may therefore have been the site of the earliest large-scale civilization; but it soon spread westward to the Nile, and by 5000 B.C. both were flourishing. [Agriculture also spread to the Indus. Some thousand years later, it began independently in the Hwang-ho region of northern China. Some thousands of years later still, it began among the Mayans of North America and the Incas of South America.]

The crucial discovery of writing, which took place not long before 3000 B.C., was made by the Sumerians who then lived along the lower reaches of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Since the use of writing is the boundary line between prehistory and history, the Sumerians were the first to have a history. The technique was quickly picked up by the Egyptians, however.

Living on a river may mean that farmers have an unfailing source of water whether it rains or not, but the water won't come to the farmer of its own accord. It must be brought there. To do so in pails is clearly ineffective, so one must dig a ditch into which river water can run of its own accord and maintain that ditch to keep it from silting up, with raised banks along them and along the river, to prevent too easy flooding.

Taking care of such an irrigation network requires a careful and well coordinated community effort. This places a premium on good government and capable leadership. It

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Nationhood came first to Egypt, and the reason is the Nile.

also places a premium on cooperation among the various cities along a river, since if a city upstream is wasteful of water, or pollutes it, or allows flooding, that will harm all the cities downstream. There is a certain pressure, therefore, to develop a river-wide government, or what we would refer to as a nation.

Nationhood came first to Egypt, and the reason is the Nile.

The Nile is a placid river, not given at all to violent moods. This means that even primitive boats, inefficient in design and fragile in structure, can float on the Nile without trouble. There is no fear of storms.

What's more, the water flows northward and the wind usually blows southward. This means that one can hoist a simple sail if one wishes to be blown upriver (south) and then take it down if you wish the current to carry you downriver (north). Thanks to the quality of the Nile, then, people and goods could easily move from city to city.

Such movement up and down the river insured that the city-states would share a language and a culture and feel a certain economic interdependence and communal understanding.

As for the Sumerians, they had two rivers. One, the Tigris, was too turbulent to be navigable by simple means (hence its name, "tiger"). The Euphrates is more easily handled, and the major Sumerian cities therefore lined its banks. Still, it was not quite the placid highway that the Nile was, and the Sumerian cities felt more isolated than the Egyptians did and were therefore less prone to cooperation.

Furthermore, while the Nile was bounded on both sides by deserts that kept outsiders at bay, the Euphrates was less well protected and more open to raids and to settlement by surrounding peoples. This meant that the Tigris-Euphrates valley contained also Akkadians, Arameans, and other people whose language and culture was different from that of the Sumerians, while the population along the Nile, on the other hand, was quite uniform.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Egypt was unified before the peoples of the Tigris-Euphrates were. Somewhere around 2850 B.C., a ruler named Narmer (known as Menes to the Greeks) united the cities of the Nile under his rule and established the nation of Egypt. We don't know the details of how this

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was done, but it seems to have been a relatively peaceful process.

The Sumerian cities, however, fought each other viciously, and the region was not unified till 2360 B.C., five centuries after the Egyptians had been. What's more, the Sumerians had fought themselves into war-weary weakness so that the union was brought about by a non-Sumerian, Sargon of Agade. He established his rule by harsh conquest and brought under his banner a variety of languages and cultures so that Sargon's unified kingdom was not a nation but, rather, an empire.

An empire tends to be less stable than a nation as the dominated ethnic groups feel resentment against the dominating one. The Tigris-Euphrates valley therefore saw a succession of upsets as first one group and then another gained predominance, or as raiders from outside took advantage of internal disunion to establish themselves. Egypt, in contrast, was an extraordinarily stable society for its first twelve centuries of nationhood.

Then there is the matter of the calendar.

Primitive people use the Moon for the purpose, since the Moon's phases repeat themselves every 29½ days. That is a period that is short enough to handle and long enough to be useful. It gives us the "lunar month," which can be 29 or 30 days long in alternation.

Eventually, it was noted that every twelve months or so the seasons went through their cycle. Twelve lunar months after sowing time, it was sowing time again, in other words. Of course, the seasons are not as reliable as the phases of the Moon. Springs can be cold and late, or mild and early. In the long run, it was clear, however, that twelve lunar months [which have a total of 354 days] was not quite long enough to mark the cycle of the seasons. After two or three years, a lunar calendar of this sort would indicate sowing time so much earlier than it should be that it would lead to disaster.

For that reason a 13th month had to be added to the year every now and then if the lunar calendar was to be kept even with the seasonal cycle. Eventually, a 19-year cycle was established within which twelve years had, in a certain fixed order, twelve lunar months, or 354 days, and seven had 13 lunar months, or 383 days. This meant that, on the average, the year was 365 days long.

This calendar was awfully complicated, but it worked and it spread to other peoples, including the Greeks and the Jews. The Jewish liturgical calendar to this day is the

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one developed by the people of the Tigris-Euphrates.

The early Egyptians were aware of and used the lunar months, but they were also aware of something else. The Nile (as we know, but they did not) rises among the mountains of east central Africa. When the rainy season comes to that distant region, water tumbles into the lakes and rivers and surges down the Nile.

The level of the Nile rises and the river floods over its banks for a period of time, leaving a deposit of rich, fertile silt behind. It is the Nile flood which insures the harvest, and the Egyptians awaited it eagerly, for in years when it was late, scanty or both, they would see hard times.

The close attention Egyptians paid to the flooding of the Nile made them realize that it came, on the average, every 365 days, and it seemed to them that it was this period that was of overwhelming importance. They, therefore, adopted a solar calendar. They made every month 30 days long, so that twelve of them marked 360 days, and added five monthless holidays at the end before starting another cycle of twelve months. In this way the months were "calendar months" that were out of step with the Moon, but in step with the seasons.

Actually, it was not quite in step with the seasons. The year is not 365 days long, but very close to 365¼. The Egyptians could not help but understand this, for every year the Nile flood came six hours later (on the average) according to the Egyptian calendar. This meant that the date of the flood wandered through the entire calendar and returned to the original date only after 365 X 4, or 1460 days.

This wandering could have been prevented by adding a 366th day to the year every four years, but the Egyptians never bothered to do this. However, when the Romans finally adopted the Egyptian calendar in 46 B.C., they spread those five extra days through the year, giving some months 31 days, and added an extra day every four years. That (with very minor modifications) is the calendar the whole world uses today — for secular purposes, anyway.

The Nile flood sometimes wiped away the markings that separated the holdings of one family from those of another. Methods had to be devised to redetermine those boundaries. It is thought that this slowly gave rise to the methods of calculation that we know as "geometry" (from Greek words meaning "to measure the Earth").

Those same floods assured Egypt of so much food that it could afford to trade the surplus to surrounding

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peoples not blessed with the Nile and to get in exchange foreign artisanry. The Nile thus encouraged international trade.

What's more, with the large food surplus, it was not necessary to put every pair of hands to work growing food. There was an ample labor supply to be put to the task of what we would today call "public works." The prize example, of course, was the raising of the Pyramids between 2600 and 2450 B.C.

It may be that the Pyramids set the example of gigantism in architecture in the Western world. The latest manifestation of this I can see from my apartment windows — the total conversion of Manhattan into traffic-choking skyscrapers.

To my way of thinking, then, the Nile has given us one of the two earliest civilizations, boats, the first nation, the solar calendar, geometry, international trade and public works. It has also given us a mystery that has intrigued human beings for thousands of years. Where does the Nile originate? What is its source?

The ancient world of western Asia and the Mediterranean knew of seven rivers with lengths of 1900 kilometers (1180 miles) or more. Leaving out the Nile, the other six, together with their lengths, are:

Euphrates - 3600 kilometers (2235 miles)
Indus - 2900 kilometers (1800 miles)
Danube - 2850 kilometers (1770 miles)
Oxus - 2540 kilometers (1580 miles)
Jaxartes - 2200 kilometers (1370 miles)
Tigris - 1900 kilometers (1180 miles)

The Persian Empire included the Tigris and Euphrates in their totality. The Oxus and the Indus were at the eastern extremity of that Empire, and the Jaxartes was just beyond the northeastern boundary. The Danube formed the northern boundary of much of the European dominions of the Roman Empire. The source of each of these rivers was known as a matter of public knowledge, or, in the case of the Oxus and Jaxartes, from travelers' reports.

That left the Nile. It was the core of Egypt from the beginning and was included eventually in the Persian Empire and, still later, in the Roman Empire. The Nile, however, was twice as long (as we now know) as the longest of the other rivers, and it extended outside the limits of civilization right down into modern times, so that in all that time no one knew where the source was.

The Egyptians were the first to wonder. About 1678 B.C., the land was invaded by Asians who were using the horse and chariot for warfare—

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something the Egyptians had not encountered before. The Egyptians finally managed to throw them out about 1570 B.C.

In reaction, the Egyptians invaded Asia in its turn and established the "Egyptian Empire." For nearly four centuries, Egypt was the strongest power in the world.

Under the Empire, the Egyptians expanded up the Nile. The Nile has occasional sections of rough water ("cataracts") that are numbered from the north to the south. The First Cataract is at the city known as Syene to the ancient Greeks and as Aswan to us today. This is 885 kilometers (550 miles) south of the Mediterranean. It was a navigation problem and Egypt proper did not extend south of the First Cataract. Even today modern Egypt extends only 225 kilometers (140 miles) south of the Cataract.

South of the First Cataract was a nation called Nubia. Today it is called Sudan. Occasionally, strong Egyptian monarchs had attempted to extend their dominion beyond the First Cataract, and, under the Empire, that effort reached its maximum. The Empire's greatest conqueror, Thutmose III, penetrated, about 1460 B.C., to the Fourth Cataract where the Nubian capital of Napata stood.

Napata is about 2000 kilometers (1250 miles) upstream from the mouth of the Nile, and the river was still going strong, still mighty, showing no signs of dwindling to its source.

The later conquerors of Egypt — the Ptolemies, the Romans, and the Muslims — made no effort to extend their political control south of the First Cataract. If anyone explored southward, no coherent account of their travels remain.

The first modern European to venture south of Aswan was a Scottish explorer, James Bruce (1730-1794). In 1770 he travelled to Khartoum (the modern capital of Sudan), which is about 640 kilometers (400 miles) upstream from the ruins of Napata. There two rivers join to form the Nile. One (the Blue Nile) comes in from the southeast; the other (the White Nile) comes in from the southwest.

Bruce followed the Blue Nile upstream for something like 1300 kilometers (800 miles) and finally came to Lake Tana in northwest Ethiopia. He felt that to be the source of the Nile, but he was wrong. The Blue Nile is merely a tributary. It is the White Nile that is the main stream.

Arab traders had brought back vague tales of great lakes in East Africa, and some European explorers thought that those might well be the source of the White Nile. Two English explorers, Richard

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Francis Burton (1821-1890) and John Hanning Speke (1827-1864), started from Zanzibar on the east African coast in 1857 and by February 1858, reached Lake Tanganyika, a long, narrow body of water 1000 kilometers (620 miles) from the African coast.

By then, Burton had had enough and left. Speke, however, moved northward on his own and, on July 30, 1858, reached Lake Victoria. This is 69,500 square kilometers (26,818 square miles) in area, so that it is a little larger than West Virginia. It is the largest lake in Africa, and the only fresh-water lake that is larger is Lake Superior, which has an area one-fifth greater than that of Victoria.

The White Nile issues from the northern rim of Lake Victoria which can thus represent the source of the river. However, the longest river that flows *into* Lake Victoria is the Luvironza, which is 1150 kilometers (715 miles) long and flows into the lake from the west.

A drop of water from the headwaters of the Luvironza could flow into Lake Victoria and out again into the White Nile and from there to the Mediterranean, travelling 6,736 kilometers (4,187 miles).

The source of the Luvironza is, therefore, the source of the Nile, and it is located in the modern nation of Burundi, about 55 kilometers (35 miles) east of Lake Tanganyika. When Burton broke away, he was almost at the source of the Nile.

But, then, how was he to know?

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This new short novel by Phyllis Eisenstein features one of the more popular characters to appear in F & SF, a telekinetic minstrel named Alaric. When we last saw Alaric, he had just escaped the grim Red Lord, whose greatest pleasure lay in torture, and who drew victims for his entertainment from among his own people.

BEYOND THE RED LORD'S REACH

By Phyllis Eisenstein

THE AIR WAS THIN AND chill at the crest of the ridge, and Alaric the minstrel found his breath coming hard and fast even though he stood quite still. Far behind, in the lowlands of the south, spring was well-begun; but here, among the highest of the northern mountains, beneath a bright yet heatless sun, the heavy hand of winter ruled, and snowfields glittered as if strewn with gemstones.

Alaric pulled his cloak tighter. Slung against his chest, his lute shared the warmth of his body. On his back, his knapsack was light, with just a change of clothes tucked into it, and a seldom-used sword. He had traveled far with so few possessions; he expected to travel farther yet before the longest night closed his eyes, and so excised the canker of his dreams.

During his stay in the mountains, those dreams were grim and desolate. Within them, he saw himself running over a vast dark plain, but never gaining a stride on the gaunt shadow that loomed above the distant

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peaks. He knew that shadow, and its staring eyes, hot as coals, that burned into his neck when he averted his face. They were the eyes of a lord of misery, a Lord of Blood, and they held a bottomless hunger that gnawed at his bones.

He had had more than his fill of such dreams, and of the somber mountains in which he suffered them; he was glad to see that ths latest crest marked the last of the heights. Beyond, the land sloped downward ruggedly; in the distance, he could just make out the snowline, where frozen winter began at last to give way to hardy herbs and scrub. An ordinary human being would have labored at that descent, half-scrambling, half-sliding, clutching at frigid boulders. But Alaric merely sighted on an outcropping far below, and in a single heartbeat, he was there. Four more such traverses brought him to the snowline. There, he brushed the clinging whiteness from his boots before moving on.

At last the land leveled itself into a rolling plain where new grass was just beginning to show amid last year's dried and yellowed tussocks. Scattered trees, their branches barely touched with green, marked the sites of brooks and ponds, and a light, erratic wind blew as warm as spring should be. The young minstrel pushed his cloak back to let that breeze sweep the mountain chill from his body and from his heart.

Late in the afternoon, he caught his first glimpse of living creatures on the plain, a faint line of dots moving westward far ahead. With caution born of his wanderings, he dropped to the ground; wild or domesticated, whatever those creatures were, they might be trailed by men, and a stranger with a witch's mode of travel had need of caution when men were near. Lying on his belly, Alaric used his power to move closer, shielded by clumps of tufted grass.

The creatures were deer of a sort he had never seen before, thick-bodied, with huge feet and slender legs that gave them a gawky, lumbering stride. Most of them were females, their brows not encumbered by antlers, their bellies bulging with unborn young; only a few were males, with massive antlers still in velvet.

Two of the largest males had riders.

Dressed in fur-trimmed leather, their long dark hair clubbed with thongs, the riders were men of middle years. Each carried a bow slung over his shoulder, and a quiver of arrows fletched in white; each bore a short sword at his waist. They did not seem to be in any hurry, lazing along with

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reins limp in their hands, letting their mounts graze at will.

Herders, thought Alaric. That meant a village nearby. He moved back to the place from which he had first sighted them and, gauging the sun's height above the horizon, judged he would spend a good part of the remaining daylight in approaching them as an ordinary traveler would. He tucked the lute under one arm and set off at a brisk pace.

They saw him, as he had presumed they would, long before he was close enough to hail them. One rode a short way toward him, then stopped and waited, while his mount dipped its broad muzzle into the grass once more. Alaric's shadow was a long, thin companion at his side by the time he reached that rider.

"Good eve," said the minstrel, halting a few paces from man and beast, sweeping his hat off and making a deep bow.

The herder peered down at him with pale greenish eyes rimmed by countless fine creases. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Alaric, singer of songs." The minstrel curled both hands about the neck of his lute. "If you care for music, I have a good deal in me. Or if not, perhaps you can tell me of folk who do."

"I have not heard your name before," said the herder. He had a faint, lilting accent, pleasant to the ear. "Where do you come from?"

Alaric tipped his head back toward the mountains. "The south."

The man glanced in that direction, his pale eyes seeming to measure the distance to those peaks before they turned to the minstrel again. "You crossed the mountains?"

Alaric nodded.

The man considered him a moment longer, and then the creases about his eyes deepened as his mouth broke into a smile. "I am Fowsh, of Nuriki's bank. We've had no southern minstrel among us in my memory. Perhaps your songs will all be new to us."

Alaric bowed again. "Some of them at least, for I have written those myself and not yet taught them to any other singer."

"Come to our camp, then," said the herder. "The day is nearly gone, and we must return for supper. You can ride old White-ear over there." He waved toward the grazing animals.

Alaric looked at the herd uncertainly. "I have never ridden a deer before."

"No? Well, you won't find it difficult. My daughter has only known

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four summers, and she rides easily." He turned his animal about and led Alaric toward the rest of the creatures.

White-ear was docile enough, and though its bare back made a bony seat that shifted awkwardly with every step, Alaric managed to stay astride, clinging with knees and thighs, and with hands locked about both antlers. He had almost become accustomed to the precarious ride by the time they sighted the herders' camp.

The camp was formed by a circle of perhaps a dozen tents, and rimming this circle, in a series of enclosures formed by posts and ropes, stood clusters of deer. One of the pens was empty, and Alaric's companions led their charges to it, dismounted, and drew a pair of ropes aside to let their deer enter.

Alaric followed the herders into the ring of tents, where a crowd of people bustled among a dozen cooking fires, and the smell of roasting meat filled the air. Here were more dark-haired men in leather, and as many women, dark-haired too, with their unbound tresses splashing over their shoulders, and their eyes all pale shades of green or blue. The women wore leather, too — sleeveless leather bodices, fringed skirts, and fur-trimmed boots. Even the children wore finely cured hides, the same mellow brown as their elders, like the wood of the black walnut tree. And the tents were also made of hide stitched together with strong sinew.

Three children were the first to notice Alaric's arrival. Two of them stared at the stranger a moment and then ran, shouting, to their mothers. The third stood her ground and merely looked up. Fowsh swung her up into his arms and gave her plump cheek a kiss, but the child did not take her great pale eyes from the minstrel.

He smiled at her, and then he doffed his cap and gave her his deepest bow.

A moment later, the people at the nearest fires had turned their faces toward him, women with ladles in their hands, men kneeling at roasting spits. One of the latter stood as Fowsh led Alaric in his direction. He was gray-haired and gray bearded, but his back was straight, and his bare arms were heavily muscled. A stocky, gray-haired woman stood at the other side of his fire, stirring the contents of a shallow pot, and close by her were a woman perhaps half her age and a beardless youth.

"We have a guest for supper," the herder said to them all. "A minstrel from the south. He calls himself Alaric."

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The older man looked Alaric up and down. "We don't see many travelers from the south."

"I don't wonder at that," Alaric said. Thoughts of the Red Lord flashed through his mind, but he swept them away, as a broom clears dusty cobwebs from a corner. "The mountains offer little hospitality. But I have traveled all my life, and a few mountains cannot daunt me."

The man stroked his short beard with thick, calloused fingers. "And where are you bound, traveler, that mountains mean so little to you? On some quest for gold or gems? You will be disappointed if that is so, for we have none here in the north."

"I have no quest," said Alaric, "unless it be to view the great Northern Sea of legend. But I have no home, either, and an unquenchable wanderlust. I trade my songs for food and lodging. And the smell of your supper makes me hope that you will be generous with at least the first."

"Of course we shall," the gray-haired woman said sharply. "In the north we do not turn folk away from our fires."

"My thanks, good lady." Alaric bowed to her.

"You southern fools know nothing of life here. Why, when I was a girl, a whole caravan of men froze to death on this very plain almost in sight of our own camp. We found them after a storm, all huddled together in a few flimsy tents. You'd find the Northern Sea?" She shook the dripping ladle at him, her expression stern. "And you with not a fur to cover you. What a fool you are!"

Alaric shrugged lightly. "Perhaps so, good lady. But I am willing to learn from you. I have no desire to die young."

She gave him a long, appraising look. "Anyone who travels alone and in a foreign land desires to die young."

"Ah, now, Mother," said Fowsh, "don't judge him so harshly. The young never think of death." Turning his face to Alaric, he said, "Our family had another son once. He went into the mountains, alone, and never returned. A mother does not forget the child she bore, even after twenty-five years."

"He was young and foolish, like you, minstrel," said the old woman.

Alaric wondered if she had lost him to the Red Lord, but it was not a question he would ever dare to ask. Instead, he said, "There are dangers in the mountains, but I was fortunate enough to escape them. I sorrow that your son was not so fortunate, kind lady."

"It was long ago," the old man said gruffly. Of a sudden, he knelt at

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the spit once more and turned the brace of small birds that roasted over the flames. "Come," he said, glancing over his shoulder at Alaric, "if you be a minstrel, give us a song while supper finishes its cooking. Oren!" He waved at the beardless youth. "Bring a rug for our guest."

The boy ducked into the nearest tent and quickly returned with a small cream-colored carpet, which he spread near the fire. Alaric settled himself upon it, easing the pack and the lute down beside him.

At the first chords, the first few words, heads turned in every part of the camp. People moved toward him, ladles, knives, even bowls still in their hands. Others craned to see the source of the music, like hungry animals who, smelling food, sought its location. Alaric pitched his voice to carry to the farthest.

"Let yonder hill be my only guide.
Through storm and wind, through day and night,
My love is there, in the crystal tree;
A prisoner now, she waits for me."

It was an old tale of love and enchantment, of a princess captive, of an evil sorcerer, of a valiant knight; and like so many of Alaric's songs, it had a joyless ending. With the sorcerer's blood still marking his blade, the knight struck the crystal tree to break the spell, only to discover that enchantment could outlive the enchanter. The last verse found him dying of grief, his arms clasped about the tree. By the time the final melancholy words were sung, several of Alaric's listeners were weeping.

The evening breeze carried the last chord away, leaving only deep quiet for a moment, and then, as the leather-clad people realized the song was done, they began to talk again among themselves, but softly. And they turned once more to their suppers.

The younger woman at the graybeard's fire was one of those who wept. She dashed the tears away with the back of one wrist and gave a sigh. "Oh, its a sad world where such things happen."

Alaric watched her for a moment, as she held a bowl for the gray-haired woman to fill from the bubbling pot. And when she brought him that bowl, he smiled at her gently and said, "Fortunately, such things happen only rarely."

The stew was meaty, with fleshy roots sliced thickly into it. When

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Alaric finished his share, the graybeard pulled a bird off the spit for him. After they had all eaten, there were cups of blue-white liquid passed around, pungent as strong wine.

"If you've never drunk this before, take care," said Fowsh. "It goes to the head."

Alaric looked into his wooden cup. "What is it?"

"A wine we make from deer's milk."

The taste was odd, but not unpleasant. Having known some of the headiest wines of the south, Alaric limited himself to that cup, and to cold sweet water from a nearby brook.

They were a family group, the people at this fire. The young woman was Fowsh's wife, mother of the child; the youth was his brother; the elderly pair, his parents. They would be packing up in the morning, along with the rest of the camp, moving north. To the calving grounds, they explained to Alaric, so the does might drop their young.

"You are welcome to come along," said the graybeard, "if you'll sing for us again."

"I need little urging to sing," said Alaric, and he took up his lute. He gave them a cheerful song this time, the tale of the shepherd who fell asleep when he should have been guarding his flock, and who, on waking, found that the sheep had carried him home on their backs and performed all of his evening duties to keep him from being punished. He had his hosts laughing — and a good many of their neighbors — at the antics of the sheep, who were so much more industrious than their keeper. And so he sang deep into the night, light songs and dark, while the fires burned and burned and finally shrank to embers, while the children fell asleep in their parents' laps and even the parents began to nod. Little by little, as the needle-bright stars wheeled in the sky, his audience thinned, retiring to the circle of tents, until finally only Fowsh and his wife were left, barely visible in the fading ember-glow.

"Enough, minstrel," the herder said at last. "You will have no voice left for tomorrow."

But the songs had been low for some time, almost lullabies, and Alaric's throat was young and strong. Still, his body was tired with the long walk of the day, and so he set aside his lute.

Fowsh brought a bearskin from his tent and held it out to him.

"Thank you, but I have a good cloak to cover me," said Alaric.

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"Dawn comes cold on the plain," said the man. "You may be glad of something heavier by then. Take it and welcome; we have others."

"You are most kind, sir."

Fowsh and his wife stood over him for a moment, arm in arm, their bodies faintly silhouetted against the stars. "Minstrel," the herder said at last, "the Northern Sea is no legend. I have never been there, but some among our people have. We will meet them at the calving grounds. If you wish to see it, you must go with them."

Alaric yawned. "Do they cook as well as you?"

The herder laughed softly. "So they claim."

"Then I will consider your suggestion."

Still laughing, Fowsh took his wife into their tent.

Alaric slept easy that night for the first time since leaving the Red Lord's domain, and he dreamed of rolling plains of soft herbs, a gentle place where by law nothing red could flow.

In the morning, Alaric's new traveling companions struck camp with a speed that amazed him. The tents came apart, each into three or four pieces, and were transformed into pouches for clothing, rugs, cooking utensils. Bound with ropes, these packs were lashed to the waiting deer. Atop them went bundles of posts that had tethered the herd or supported the deer-hide shelters. The sun had barely risen twice its breadth above the horizon when the whole encampment was mounted and ready to move northward.

Alaric bestrode his steed of the previous day, with a bridle this time and more confidence. And though he neither saw nor heard any signal, suddenly the crowd around him was in motion — perhaps three-score people and twice that many animals, ambling northward. Looking back a few moments later, Alaric saw their camping place: the trampled grass, the dozen dark patches where fires had burned. A few moments more, and it had melted into the plain, as if it had never been. Alaric smiled and shook his head as he recalled how he had thought of their living place as a village. A village it was, of course; but a village on deer-back.

Riders shifted place frequently in the moving crowd. Fowsh rode beside Alaric for a time, and then gave way to other folk. Toward midmorning, Fowsh's wife eased up beside him.

"Minstrel," she said, after riding in silence for a time, "was it very long ago?"

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He glanced at her quizzically. "Was *what* very long ago, lady?"

"Your song of last evening. The knight and the princess and the enchantment. Did it happen long ago?"

Alaric hesitated. Though most folk he met believed in magic, he did not. He had traveled much and yet never seen any real magic, save his own power, and that was just a natural thing, a gift of birth, no black art learned in the hush of darkness. His only concern with magic was that he not be taken, by the fearful, for a dabbler in that art. He had never given a thought to any truth that might lie in the tale of the crystal tree. "It is just a song, good lady," he said.

"Was it not founded on some true occurrence?"

For another moment he was silent, and then, slowly, he said to her, "In all truth, I do not know. It is a very old song."

"Oh." Disappointment colored that small sound. "And there was never anyone to help them?"

"Not that I have ever heard."

"Did he never search for help?"

Alaric had to shrug. "You ask questions that I cannot answer, lady."

"A witch could have broken the spell," she said firmly. "If only he had come to us, he would have gotten his princess back."

He smiled slightly. "Have you a witch among you?"

"Of course. Do you think we could live here in the north without one?"

"Well . . . I'm sure I don't know. Just now, the north seems pleasant enough, but I recall last night there was some mention of terrible storms. . . . Who would this witch be? Yourself?"

"I?" There was startlement in her voice. "Do I look like a witch?"

"I have met a few witches in my day," he said. "I don't recall that they had any special appearance in common."

"Had they no amulets, no carven staves, no smell of sweet spice about them?"

"Are those the things that mark a witch among you?"

"Of course."

He shrugged once more. "Well, it is not so in other lands. But if you are not the witch, who is? I saw no amulets, no carven staves last night. Perhaps your witch does not care for music?"

"Kata is our witch," she said, "and she spends most of her time with the band of Simir, our high chief. I do not know if she likes music. You will

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see her at the calving and may find out for yourself."

"She is a woman of great power, is she?"

"Very great power. She brings the good weather every year."

"Indeed?"

"And give us hunting magic. You ate the fruits of her skill last night, that stewed rabbit and those roasted birds."

"I thought Fowsh's father shot them."

"Of course. Long ago Kata gave him hunting magic."

"Indeed?"

"And if my Fowsh ever needs it, she will give some to him."

"A valuable woman," Alaric murmured.

He had seen witches before, both women and men, who said they knew potent spells, who chanted strange phrases and made passes in the air with their hands, who had the folk of the neighborhood convinced of their power. Such people were usually feared and hated, usually outcasts, often murdered when their backs were turned. In a few places, though, they were kept and even coddled by men whose armies gave them mastery over commoner folk, men who thought a few mystic powers could be useful. When he was younger, Alaric feared witches, feared that their preternatural sensibilities would find him out, that they would expose him for the creature he was, and even destroy him out of jealousy or self-protection. Yet that had never happened. All the spell-casters he had ever met had proved to be frauds: some of them merely poor old women, accused by neighbors seeking a cause for the failure of crops; some of them self-proclaimed but just as empty, deceiving folk for their own advantage. There were real witches in the world, Alaric knew, but they were all of his own blood, and their only mystic power was the one he possessed.

Is this Kata such a one? he wondered.

Alaric was an excellent hunter, in his own way. But his gift was not one that could be given. And controlling the weather? *No, she is a fraud,* he thought, *tricking these people into believing she makes life in the north easier.* He shook his head slowly. *She must be quite a persuader, this Kata.*

And he found himself curious, most curious, to meet her.

Shortly after noon, the band stopped to make camp. As soon as the deer had been relieved of their burdens, their herders took them westward to graze, while the band's hunters walked in the opposite direction in search

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of game. Alaric stayed at the camp, making himself useful to Fowsh's wife — laying out rugs, clearing a space for the fire, fetching water. Later, he sang a little, and the children gathered round him to listen, and to stretch shy fingers out to touch the lute. He even took a few of them on his knee in turns and let them pluck the strings.

Fowsh's father and brother returned with a bag of hares, and by the time the herders had brought back their charges, a savory supper was ready. Afterward, Alaric sang late into the night again, and he could not help feeling that he had never sung so well in castle or manor house as within that circle of tents. When he finished this time, Fowsh's nearest neighbors came to ask if he would share supper with them the following night.

And so Alaric began to move among the nomads, from family to family, from fire to fire, as they all paid him in turn with the only coin they had. He ate well, he slept warm, and if rain came by night, there was always a corner for him in some dry, snug tent. The society of the nomads enclosed him like a bright cocoon, and it made the mountains seem very far away.

A month passed, and as the band traveled steadily northward, Alaric came to know them all. They were a close-knit people, always ready to help each other. Their leader Nuriki, hunter and owner of many deer, seemed to Alaric less a commander than a gatherer of consensus, less a judge than a negotiator; certainly, no one treated him with the deference accorded even a minor noble in the south. There was no need for Alaric to please *him* especially, as he would have had to please a southern lord; Nuriki was happy just to be part of the audience. Alaric liked him for that. Indeed, he liked the whole band, and he was comfortable with Nuriki's people as he had never been with other folk before.

Their northward movement seemed almost to keep pace with spring, and so when they finally arrived at the calving grounds, the season was still young, the grass still new underfoot. The calving grounds themselves seemed no different than any other part of the plain, save that they were occupied by so great a throng of people and deer — a shuffling, stamping sea of deer. There were no enclosures for the animals here; they roamed free in a vast, seething mass. It was the tent clusters, set on the fringes of that enormous herd, that were fenced, the ropes and posts now serving to keep the animals out.

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The smoke of a thousand cookfires overhung the area, and a constant hum, a wavering blend of human and animal voices, enveloped it. Alaric's companions selected an empty space at the southern edge of the herd for their campsite, and as soon as their deer had been stripped of all burdens, even before a single tent had been raised, Fowsh and the other herders escorted the animals into that milling, bawling mass.

"How will you ever find your own deer again?" Alaric asked when Fowsh returned.

"We know our deer and they know us," the man replied. "Gathering them up will not be as hard as you think."

In his absence, the tents had all been set in their circle; now the campfires, fueled by deer-droppings, were blazing heartily, and in a dozen pots, the midday meal was simmering.

Hunting had been poor these last few days, with band after band crossing the same territory, and so there were only roots and fragments of dried meat in the stew. But tomorrow, Alaric knew, deer would be slaughtered, and the nomads would begin to feast.

"I have passed the news that we have a minstrel among us," Fowsh said.

His mother leaned out of her tent. "You could have waited," she said. "You could have held one more night of him for ourselves before you gave him away."

Fowsh laughed softly. "One more song, you mean, Mother. I doubt we could keep him secret longer than that."

"You have been kind to me," Alaric said. "But it is time others knew the burden of feeding me."

"It has not been a burden, minstrel." He shook his head. "Nuriki's daughter sings. Or calls it singing, anyway. But she has not opened her mouth since you came to us. Now I suppose she will take it up again." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, there will be song and music in plenty while we are here in the calving grounds. There are other bands with singers and drums and flutes, and there will be dancing to all the old, familiar tunes." He grinned at Alaric. "Mark me, Simir will claim you in the end."

"Simir?"

"The high chief. He will offer the most comfort, the best food, the finest diversions. His band is the largest of all. And he goes north when the calving is done."

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"To the Northern Sea?"

"Some of his hunters have seen it."

"And Nuriki's band?"

"No farther than this, minstrel. We are the soft southerners of this country." He laid a hand on Alaric's shoulder. "Take my advice, lad: if you must visit the Northern Sea, go in company. It is easy to die if you go alone."

"I shall not forget."

Fowsh grinned again. "Good. And now, if you will, give us a last song for Nuriki's people before someone spirits you away to another fire and a better mid-day meal."

And it was a last song because, when it was done, there were a dozen invitations from listeners who had drifted near during the singing. And Fowsh himself advised Alaric on which offer of food and drink was most worthy.

Days passed, during which the minstrel was shuttling from fire to fire and meal to meal. When he was not singing, he wandered among the tents, listening to folk discussing their animals or trading news, or watching them barter rope, fine leatherwork, furs, and packets of herbs; he even saw a wedding, the bride and groom making their vows before a crowd of elders. And at night, sometimes, he went to the heart of the gathering, where tents stood shoulder to shoulder about a wide clearing with a huge blaze at its center. There, the nomads danced to the beat of drums and the trill of flutes, and there they often sang, though to Alaric's ear the tunes were almost too monotonous to call music. Still, he listened sharply, in hopes of finding fresh material for his own verses, and sometimes he felt his own blood answering those steady pulses of sound.

When he sang at night, he took care to do it far from the dance ground, in places where the call of drum and flute was too distant to interfere with his quieter kind of music. And often, among his listeners, he saw the flushed and sweaty faces that marked folk who had left the dancing for softer diversion — for the tales of love and sorrow, of sorcery and death, and only rarely of laughter, that were his wares.

As the night deepened, the younger couples were usually the first to slip away, though not always the quickest, for they would dally at the edge of the crowd to hear the last lines of some sad song of love. And Alaric's gaze would follow them to where they lingered in the tent

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shadows, where sometimes they kissed before leaving his presence. And in that long moment, the frozen moment of embrace, they took on the semblance of graceful statues in some garden of ancient mystery; they became the emblem of something timeless and eternal, something that was a part of and also beyond simple desire. At last they would melt into the further darkness, and Alaric would find himself musing on his latest song, and on the one he might sing next. Now and again, his new choice would recount some greater sorrow than the one recounted before.

Alaric had been at the calving grounds no more than a week when the first of the deer dropped their young. Twelve days later, when the nomads were saying that the process was nearly finished and soon the bands would go their separate ways once more, Simir the high chief sent for him.

SIMIR'S TENTS had been pointed out to Alaric more than once already. They stood on a rise at the northern edge of the herd, a few very large tents on the highest ground, surrounded by several circular tiers of smaller ones. Here the nomads went with disputes that could not be settled within their own bands, and here they paid their lord in kind for his judgment, in deer and leather and all manners of goods valued by the nomads. That, many told Alaric, was his only tax upon them.

Well, he builds no castles, no roads, no bridges, the minstrel thought. *What need has he for taxes?*

Alaric climbed the path of trampled grass that wound among the lower tiers of tents. Ahead of him walked the youth who had brought the summons. He was a tall lad, perhaps two or three years younger than Alaric, but already well-muscled. His hair was much lighter than that of the other nomads and he wore it shorter, cut shaggy just below his ears. He had not given his name, but another man had called him Terevli, and Alaric's audience had parted to let him pass.

At the crest of the rise, seated on a thick pile of carpets before the largest tent, and surrounded by chattering people, was a man of great physical presence. Had he been standing, he would have been taller than most of those about him, and he was broader of shoulder, and thicker of arm and thigh; he was surely a man who had swung a sword for the greater part of his life. And he was a blond, the only true blond in all that dark-haired company.

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Alaric's companion came to a halt in front of the man. "Father," he said, and he cocked a thumb toward Alaric.

The blond man had been nodding, his head turned to one side while an elderly woman spoke to him. Now, he looked to Alaric, and his wide mouth curved in a smile. "Ah, the minstrel everyone has been talking about. Welcome to Simir's fire." At his gesture, the folk about fell silent. "I trust that you have been treated well among our people."

Alaric bowed low. "Very well, my lord."

The man's smile broadened. "*My lord*," he murmured, and then he chuckled. "I can't recall ever being called so. It has a fine ring, minstrel, but I care not for its fit. Simir is my name; use that."

Alaric hesitated. "You are the high chief, sir?"

He nodded.

The minstrel bowed again. "My apologies, then. I am from the south, and it is a custom there to give such titles to those in high office."

"I know the custom," said Simir. "But we are in the north here, and no one will punish you for speaking my name. Now, I have been told that my cook is among the best of our people; and if you would consent to try her skill, I would ask you to sing for one who has spent a most burdensome day in the judging of petty quarrels."

"I have heard some small word of your cook," Alaric said. "But even were she the least of all the cooks at this gathering, I would play for the high chief. It is, after all, an honor."

"Have you sung for many high chiefs, young minstrel?"

"For kings and princes, and many a lesser noble, good Simir, and for the poorest peasant, living in a hovel of mud and thatch. I have sung for many, many people. And if the food was bad. . . ." He shrugged. "There was always another day, another hearth. One learns, when one is a minstrel, to accept the good and the bad."

"A fair philosophy for one who travels in the north," said Simir. "Come, sit down." He gestured to the space beside him. "Give me a song, that I may judge what others have said of you. They tell me I am very good at judgment." And he smiled again.

Alaric took a corner of the rug, the lute upon his thighs. He strummed a note or two, then decided on an old song, one well-loved in the south, a tale of ancient and sorcerous tragedy.

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"The forest is deep and dark and still,
Round the cave where the ruby lies,
Yet once there was lightning within those walls,
And flame in an old man's eyes,
Though his heart was chill."

When the tale was done — the evil sorcerer vanquished, the spells all rent to pieces, the lone survivor standing with head bared and sword bloodied — high chief and all the folk about him clapped their hands and stamped their feet on the trampled grass to show their pleasure.

"They did not lie when they said you were skilled," Simir declared. "We have none like you among us."

Alaric inclined his head. "I thank you, good Simir."

Simir's eyes swept him up and down, as a man might survey the lines of a horse or a dog. "Are you strong?"

"Strong? I fear I don't know what you mean, sir."

"I have heard that you seek the Northern Sea."

Alaric gave a small shrug. "I am a wanderer, good Simir; new sights and new folk are to me as gold and silver to other men. In the south, the Northern Sea is more than half legend; I thought to make it real for myself."

Simir tilted his head to one side, as if to see the young minstrel better from that angle. "It is a hard journey. I have made it, and I know. You do not look strong enough for it, minstrel, for all that you have crossed the great mountains to come here."

"We do not all have arms and shoulders like yours, Simir. Yet I have made a hard journey or two in my life. Such journeys are sometimes the stuff of good songs."

"If you survive them," said Simir. "What do you know of the north, minstrel? They say you've been here no more than a month."

Alaric nodded.

"Then you would do well to spend a few seasons among us, learning the northern way of life, before you decide to venture onward. Southerners have died on these plains through inexperience. I would not care to see so fine a minstrel as yourself join their number."

"Are you making me an invitation, good Simir?"

"To come with my band, to sing for us, I am indeed. We go north,

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minstrel. You will not find a band that travels closer to the Northern Sea than mine."

Alaric smiled. "Since we speak of an extended sojourn, first let me try your cook's skills. Then I'll give you my answer."

"Done," said Simir, and he beckoned to one of the men who stood nearby and gave orders for the evening meal to be served.

The group that gathered to eat at Simir's fire was large, perhaps a score in all. Most of the folk who had listened with him to Alaric's song were there, and others as well, old and young, who had arrived later. The boy Terevli was joined by two other sons of Simir — Gilo and Marak — both nearer to Alaric's own age; tall, muscular youths who carried themselves with easy assurance. All three took places close by their father as soon as the food was given out.

The meal was perhaps not quite as good as one or two that Alaric had enjoyed in great houses in the south, but it sufficed, the venison tender, the herbs pungent, the vegetables sweet and full-flavored. Of course, the season was spring; come winter, the fare might be thinner. Still, Alaric had never gone hungry since learning to hunt by his own methods; there would always be game from *somewhere* to put in his pot. More important to him, the company was lively, joking, laughing, and included a wandering minstrel in its liveliness. That was much more important.

When the wooden dinner bowls had been collected, Simir called for silence, his voice big and booming. "Our guest has a decision to make now," he said. "I ask him to make it here, though I already know, as surely as my heart beats, what it will be. What say you, young minstrel? Shall you give the cook a grateful kiss?"

Alaric rose to his feet. The cook, a stout matron with face reddened by the fire, stood beside the cauldrons that had produced a meal for so many. She looked a trifle bewildered by the high chief's words, her gaze moving uncertainly from him to the minstrel and back again. Alaric grinned and made his way through the crowd to her.

"You are an excellent cook," he said, "and I look forward to eating your suppers for a long time." And, taking her by the shoulders, he bussed her loudly on one rosy cheek.

"Here's to the minstrel who comes north with us," Simir called, raising his cup of milky spirits. "Here's to the nights when song will banish the sound of the cold wind, and our babes will rock to sleep to his lullaby."

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They raised their cups and drank, and Alaric smiled at them and took up his lute to give them a lively song to match their lively mood.

Simir's fire sank to embers. Some people drifted away, to that other, brighter fire in the distance, where the drums and the flutes played steadily, and the dancers leaped. But some stayed to hear Alaric's music, the lone human voice and the pure notes of the lute. Simir stayed, and bade the minstrel play on, till even that other fire was dimmed, and that other sound faded away. The human noises of the huge encampment were quieting for the night when Alaric stopped at last.

"You shall have a place in my own tent, minstrel," Simir said. "You shall be my own personal guest."

"Thank you, sir. But if you have no objection, as long as the weather is fine, I enjoy sleeping in the open air."

Simir's shrug was just barely visible by ember-light. "As you will. There are carpets in plenty for your bed, and furs if you should become chilled." He rose from his seat, a bear of a man in the dimness. "I bid you good night."

An old woman helped the minstrel make a pallet by the embers and then scurried away into the darkness. Alaric wrapped his lute against the night damp and settled comfortably upon his carpets. Fingers interlaced behind his head, he gazed up at the stars and listened to the soft grunting of a vast herd of deer. He could smell them, just barely, a musky scent. Soon the herders would be gathering up their animals, the band would part company, and he would move north, into the unknown.

He was just beginning to doze when he heard footsteps close by. He opened his eyes and saw a human shape looming over him. It knelt between him and the embers, a faceless shadow.

"Hello, minstrel," it said. A woman's voice.

"Yes?" he murmured.

"I heard you last night and the night before. It was I who suggested Simir send for you."

Alaric peered into the darkness but could not make out her face. "Thank you, lady. I owe you much."

"So you do."

He felt her touch on his arm, felt her fingers slide up to his shoulder, to his neck. They were cool and smooth. Then one hand slipped downward

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against the fabric of his tunic, against his chest, downward, till he caught it at his waist.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Ah," she whispered. "Does it matter?"

"Of course."

She laughed softly. "I doubt you even noticed me in the crowd." Her form blotted out the stars as she bent close, as she pressed her lips to his.

He pushed her back, firmly but not roughly. "This is not seemly behavior with a stranger, lady."

She laughed again, a deep, throaty laugh. "I am Zavia, and I make my own seemliness, minstrel." She took his hands in her own, then, and pressed them against the softness of her breasts. When he tried to pull away, she let him go, laughing once more. "You think me ugly, don't you? You think some hag has come to you under cover of darkness." She leaned away from him then, scrabbling at the fire, and a moment later he saw an ember flare as she blew it into fitful life. Laying a splint of wood against the flame, she lit a tiny torch and, turning back to him, held it close to her cheek. "You see," she said, "I am worth looking at."

Indeed, she was a strikingly pretty girl, with high cheekbones, a small, pointed chin, and eyes that seemed to dance in the flamelight. He did recall seeing her this evening, and Gilo's arm had been about her shoulders.

She tossed the brand away and, lifting Alaric's coverlet, eased herself onto his pallet. Her hands touched him again, fingers curling, and he could feel the nails bite into the flesh of his arm.

"I remember you," he said. "You sat with Gilo."

"So I did," she whispered, fitting her body to his side.

"I would not wish to anger him. Your husband?"

"I have no husband," she said, moving against him slowly, insistently. Her lips found his throat. "I am my own, no one else's. Why do you lie so still, minstrel? Have you never known a woman before?"

"I do not know your customs, lady."

"Zavia. My name is Zavia."

The feel of her warm body against his, the touch of her mouth on his throat, was almost too much for him. With an effort of will, he gripped her shoulders with both hands and held her away from him. "There are many customs in many lands," he said huskily. "In some, this would marry me

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to you. In others, it would spur your brothers to hack off my head."

Zavia's laugh was light now, teasing. "I have no brothers, fair minstrel. Not a one."

"Even so, we travelers must be careful."

"There is nothing to be careful of here, pretty boy, except perhaps my tender bones. Your hands are strong. Does that come from playing the lute?"

He did not ease his grip. "And women lie sometimes."

She touched his chest with one hand, very softly. "You've had great experience of women, then?"

"Enough to know that the sweetheart of the high chief's son should not share a poor minstrel's bed."

She sat up suddenly, almost pulling him up with her. "I am not his sweetheart," she hissed.

"Shall I believe you, lady? Shall I believe that his arm about your shoulder meant nothing?"

"Nothing, and less than nothing. Just the same as yourself, minstrel!" With a sudden, sharp movement, she tore from his grasp and, flinging the covers aside, scrambled off into the darkness.

For a time, after the sound of her hurrying footsteps had faded away, Alaric lay on his back, arms pillowing his head. He could almost feel her warmth yet, her softness, the touch of her lips. A less cautious man would have accepted her offer, he knew, even though they would be lying where anyone who decided to stoke the fire would see them. A less cautious man would not have driven her away with his doubts. Alaric closed his eyes, relief and sharp regret mingling within him, and he sighed more than once before falling asleep.

Shortly after dawn, the chief's people emerged from their tents to begin the new day. This morning, as they ate a meal of cold venison, their talk was all of the coming dispersion. Already, they could point out early-rising herders moving among the deer, singling out their own animals and bridling them. The chief's men agreed to put their own efforts off another day or two, as a few of their deer had not yet calved.

Intermittently, Zavia walked among these men, collecting empty bowls or filling cups from a large jug. Terevli followed her here and there, like a calf trailing its mother, occasionally catching up to speak in her ear, but she would always shake her head and move away from him. She avoided looking at Alaric, except for one brief, sullen glance. She did

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not take his bowl or fill his cup.

During the morning, Simir busied himself with the seemingly endless disputes of his people, leaving Alaric free to do as he wished. He watched the process of judgment for a time, watched the high chief dispense decisions based not so much on right and wrong as on the need for members of a band to live together in harmony. Often, the disputants accepted his judgment, neither side completely satisfied, yet neither completely dissatisfied, both yielding something and agreeing that the matter was finished. But sometimes such compromise was impossible, and the only way to settle the dispute was to separate the adversaries by sending one of them to some other land.

Alaric wearied of this wrangling before long and wondered how Simir could bear it day after day. The nomads who seemed so cheerful, so cooperative, so easygoing at their own fires became volatile, angry, and stubborn in dispute. And it was nearly all over deer, over their ownership and their care.

They must save a whole year's quarrels up for him, Alaric thought as he slipped away from the high chief's presence.

The rest of the morning he spent wandering among the tents. By midday, he found himself near the encampment of Nuriki's band; he saw Fowsh and waved, and in a moment, he was surrounded by familiar faces, swept to the fire, and given food. Afterward, he sang for them. They would be leaving the next day, Fowsh said, going south. If he had changed his mind about seeking the Northern Sea, he was welcome to come with them.

Alaric shook his head. "I have a place in Simir's band, just as you predicted."

Fowsh grinned and clapped him on the back.

Much later, he returned to Simir's fire and found the high chief taking his ease, all disputes put aside.

"Learning to cut the herd, minstrel?" he asked with laughter in his big voice. "That's surely not a skill you'll ever need."

Alaric smiled at him. "I hope not. I marvel that anyone can find his own deer in that crowd."

"They are as different from each other as people are. Or so they tell me." He lowered his tone conspiratorially. "Truthfully, I can scarcely tell them apart myself. I am a hunter, not a herder. Perhaps you know a good song for a hunter?"

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"Perhaps." With a flourish on the strings, he began a tale of eagles seeking their prey among the mountains, and of a boy who had vowed to take an eaglet for his own or die in the attempt. It had two endings, one tragic, one triumphant. For these listeners, he chose the latter.

"Where have you found so many tales?" Simir asked when the song was done and Alaric had been given a cup of milky wine.

The lute lay beside his hip, and Alaric plucked idly at its strings. "The world is wide and full of tales, Simir. I had a teacher, for a time, and I have met other singers over the years. I've even invented a few songs of my own." He shrugged. "I hope they are as good as the rest."

"I would hear one of those, good minstrel."

"You just did."

Simir shook his head slowly. "And I can hardly make a rhyme."

Alaric looked at him sidelong. "And I could not judge a dispute over deer to save my life."

The high chief laughed. "Then give us another song. Unless. . . ." The sound of drums had just come to their ears, marking the start of the evening's dancing. "You are young," Simir said. "You might want to be dancing instead of singing here. I won't keep you if you want to join the other young people."

"I have never been one for dancing," Alaric told him.

"My sons will show the steps. Gilo! Terevli!"

The two youths approached their father. They looked remarkably alike, though the age difference was obvious. Gilo, the elder, was well-filled out, broad-shouldered and tall; Terevli was more lightly built, with softer features.

"Yes, Father," said Gilo. He stood spraddle-legged, his fists resting on his hips, an impatient posture.

"Take the minstrel with you to the dancing," said Simir.

Gilo swung his gaze to Alaric, an arrogant gaze, one that seemed to evaluate the minstrel's slender frame and find it lacking.

Alaric looked doubtfully at Simir.

"Go, go," the high chief said. "You'll enjoy yourself. I'll look after your lute myself. No one else shall touch it."

With some reluctance, Alaric rose to his feet. Then he bowed to Simir, and to Gilo and Terevli, and followed the youths as they walked silently away from Simir's fire.

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Does he know about last night? Alaric wondered, watching Gilo's back.

They met Marak and Zavia on the way, and Zavia walked as far from Alaric as possible, as far as Marak's arm about her waist would allow.

The dancing was well-begun. A dozen couples leaped to the raucous music, sometimes clapping and stamping, sometimes swinging round each other with clasped hands. The steps seemed less complex than merely strenuous. Marak took Zavia out among the dancers and soon had her kicking and whirling like the rest.

Gilo clutched Alaric's right arm above the elbow, and his grip was like the grip of a wounded wolf's jaws. He gestured, open-handed, to the dancers. "Can you do that, minstrel?"

"I am not a very good dancer," Alaric said, and then he had to repeat the words more loudly, to be heard above the drums.

"Here," said Gilo, and he pulled Alaric over to a young woman who stood in the front row of onlookers. She was very plump and plain, and her eyes watched the dancers as a starving man watches meat being sliced. "This is our new minstrel," he said to her. "He would like to dance with you."

She looked from one youth to the other, then smiled hesitantly. "Yes," she said. "Oh, yes."

Gilo let Alaric's arm go at that. "My father's orders," he said, and slipped away into the crowd.

Alaric bowed stiffly to the young woman. "I don't know how well I'll do, but I'll try."

She knew the dance, and she was remarkably light on her feet for one so plump. Alaric muddled through the steps, mostly by imitating her, and he whirled and leaped and swung her till his sweat was flowing freely and the breath began to burn in his lungs. But the music never stopped, nor did his partner. At last, he had to call a halt, apologetically, when a cramp in his side threatened to double him over.

"Are you ill?" the young woman asked, her eyes round.

He shook his head, one hand pressed to his waist. "Just unused to dancing. But thank you. For being such a good partner."

He could almost feel her eyes on his back as he limped away. He looked over his shoulder only once, and she was watching him as she clapped time, and he had to smile. He did not see Simir's sons or Zavia anywhere, but he felt sure they had watched him dance. *Well, let them*

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have their joke, he thought. *I've survived worse.*

He walked slowly, and by the time he reached Simir's fire, the pain in his side was gone. But the cool evening breeze, which had been so pleasant on other nights, was making him shiver in his sweat-drenched tunic. In a corner of Simir's tent, he changed into dry clothing.

Outside again, he found supper ready at Simir's fire. He moved close to the flames, held his hands out to their warmth. The cook grinned at him, scooped a bowl of hot stew from the pot and passed it over. As he took it, he saw Zavia standing on the other side of the fire, staring at him. Her expression was not unlike the one that had been on the plump woman's face as she watched the dancers. He turned away and walked toward his pallet to eat, but Simir beckoned, and so he went to the high chief's side instead. The lute was waiting where he had left it.

"You enjoyed the dancing?" Simir asked.

Alaric gave him a small smile. "Not as much as you would have at my age, I think. But I did manage not to trip over my own feet."

"Did you dance with her?" Simir's voice was low, and only with his eyes did he indicate that he meant Zavia.

Alaric shook his head.

"No? Well, I suppose the boys kept her busy."

"I suppose so. I was a bit too busy myself to notice, thanks to your eldest. He found me a very lively partner."

"Did he?" Simir pursed his lips thoughtfully. "That was good of him."

Alaric bent his attention to his bowl; yet, from the corner of his eye, he could see Zavia turn her back on the fire and move off into the darkness between the tents.

"She's been watching you, minstrel," Simir said softly. "Or haven't you noticed that, either?"

Alaric shrugged. "Everyone watches a minstrel."

The high chief was silent a moment, then he said, "You hurt her pride, last night, by saying she was Gilo's."

Alaric looked up at him sharply.

"Don't be surprised at what I know, minstrel. There are few secrets in a nomad band. She is a pretty girl, don't you think?"

"Yes. She is."

"She is much pursued by the young men. Some have even caught her, when she wanted to be caught. But none has ever set a bridle on her." He

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smiled slightly. "She'll forgive you, minstrel. You are new and different, and she wants you very much."

Setting his empty bowl on the edge of the carpet, Alaric picked up the lute. "And what of those pursuing young men? What will they say to that?"

"What can they say?" said Simir. "The choice is hers."

"They can make the stranger's life unpleasant."

Simir smiled again. "The stranger is a friend of Simir, the high chief. They make his life unpleasant at their peril."

"Even his own sons?"

"I do not shrink from punishing my sons."

Alaric looked toward the shadows where Zavia had disappeared.

"Go on," said Simir, and he nudged Alaric's knee with the back of one hand. "Don't waste your youth, minstrel. It will be gone soon enough, believe me."

THE SHADOWS were empty, the space between tents merely a corridor leading to another circle of dwellings, another fire. In the flame-light there, beyond the chattering company that clustered at the cooking pots, he saw her. She stood with Gilo.

She faced away; she could not see him. Almost, he stepped back into the darkness. There had been other girls for him, there would be others yet. What need was there to meddle with one so much pursued? But then he recalled the sharpness of his regret, and as he hesitated, the moment for that backward step passed. Gilo noticed him, and Zavia, seeing her companion's face change and his eyes focused on something behind her, turned and saw him as well.

She smiled then, slowly, a small, triumphant smile. But Alaric scarcely noticed it; his eyes were held by Gilo's, by the proud, hard anger he saw there.

He hates me, Alaric thought. *I refused her. And still he hates me.*

And when at last he looked at Zavia's smile, he understood that she was just as proud as the high chief's son. *What is it like,* he wondered, *to feel that way?*

At her first step toward Alaric, Gilo caught her arm. But she threw him off with a rough word and a rougher gesture.

"You owe me a dance, Zavia!" he called as he followed her around the fire. "You haven't danced with me at all this night!"

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"Leave off!" she shouted back at him. "I've danced with you enough all year!" She halted a pace or two from Alaric. Her smile was wider now as she looked up into his face, and the firelight glimmered on her cheeks, seemed to make her skin glow. Softly, she said, "I would rather dance with the minstrel."

"Dance?" Gilo edged halfway between them, one shoulder almost thrust into Alaric's face. "Stagger, you mean. *Stumble.*"

She didn't look at him. Instead, she touched Alaric's arm with just the tips of her fingers, and by that delicate pressure drew him a few steps away from the high chief's son.

He took her hand. Her skin was smooth and warm, and immediately her fingers curled about his, claiming him, speaking to him, youth to youth, Simir's selfsame message. *I am not young any more,* he thought. *Not with what I have seen, what I have done. But I would be.* "You would be disappointed in my dancing, I fear," he told her. "But perhaps you would accept a song instead."

She tilted her head to one side, as if already listening for it. "What sort of song?"

"A special one, sung only in the finest halls of the south, where the cups are made of gold and the walls are hung with silk. A song to make great ladies weep into their jewel-encrusted hands."

"I have no wish to weep," she said in a low voice.

"Then I shall make you laugh instead."

Her fingers tightened on his. "I believe I would trade a dance for that."

"Come then; we must claim my lute from Simir's custody."

In the dark passage between tents, he looked back only once, to Gilo, still standing in the firelight. His bare arms were crossed upon his broad, leather-clad chest, and hate was like a mask on his strong face. *You will have to learn to hide that when you are high chief,* Alaric thought. A sudden chill climbed his spine, but it was dispelled just as suddenly by the pressure of Zavia's hand in his.

They had not quite reached the light of Simir's circle when she stayed him. "Minstrel."

"Yes?"

"The song is for me. For me alone."

"It is."

"Then come to my tent and sing it there."

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He did not hesitate. "As you wish," he said.

He heard her sigh in the darkness, and after a moment, her hand dropped away from his. "Why don't you fetch your lute from Simir? I'll wait for you here."

Set well back from the fire, shielded from that light by the bulk of half a dozen other tents, Zavia's was a small shelter. And within its open entry was utter blackness. Zavia slipped off for a moment and returned with a burning splint; it lit their way inside, where she transferred the flame to an oil lamp. The light revealed a cozy space, floored with a fine carpet and scattered with cushions. It seemed perfect for one person, but there was room enough for two to stand in its center, room enough to sit down cross-legged side by side, even to lean back on the cushions. Zavia closed the entry with leather laces.

"No one will disturb us now," she said.

Alaric set the lute on his knee. He plucked a chord. Then he laid his hand flat against the strings, silencing them. He looked up at her. "Last night," he said. "I was . . . harsh. I hope you'll forgive me."

Her eyes locked with his. "Surely you know I do."

He put the lute aside then and reached for her, and she came into his arms hungrily, as if she had been waiting for him a long, long time. Was it just one day that he had known her, just one night since she had slipped into his bed? It seemed like more; it seemed that he had waited half a lifetime to kiss this mouth, to feel this smooth flesh under his hands, to press these hips against his own. And if some vagrant memories of other women — other women far behind, lost forever — tried to intrude on him he pushed them away. In the life of the wanderer, only this moment was real. Only this.

Afterward, as he lay dozing, his cheek against her breast, she stroked his hair. "My minstrel," she murmured. "My Alaric." She kissed his forehead. "Alaric. What a strange name that is."

"Common enough some places," he muttered sleepily.

"In the south I suppose."

"Yes." He yawned and settled himself even closer to her. "There's a song about him. The original Alaric. Very old song. He was a great conqueror. Not much like me."

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She kissed his forehead again. "You've conquered me."

He looked up at her and smiled. "I rather thought it was the other way round, Zavia."

She spread her fingers across the curve of his cheek. "If you hadn't come to me tonight, my Alaric, I would have used magic to compel you tomorrow."

"Ah . . . magic." He stroked her arm, her shoulder, her naked back. "Well, perhaps it was as well, then, that I came to you tonight. I've always been . . . resistent to the effects of magic."

"How weak the magic of the south must be. You would never have resisted ours."

"Has it worked so often for you?"

"Of course. For me most of all, because it's in my blood."

He laughed softly. "I would believe it was in your lips," he said, and he pulled her head down to his. "They've cast a spell on me." Her mouth was like warm silk against his own.

"A different sort of spell," she whispered.

"The best sort."

She kissed him yet again. "But you would have come to me. You would have wanted me. Perhaps more, even, than you do now. Perhaps I shall use the magic anyway, to make you want me more."

He slid his hand down her arm and twined his fingers in hers. "As you wish, sweet Zavia. Bring on your magical chains. I will wear them, so long as they don't jangle against my lute strings."

Her pale eyes gazed down into his. "You jest. You don't believe me."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the fingers. "What must I believe? That you are a witch, fair Zavia? You are very young, I think, to call the weather and command the hunt. I have heard that is what the witch of this land does."

"She does indeed."

"And her name, I have heard, is Kata."

Zavia lifted her chin. "She is my mother. And I will be a witch after her. Already I am her acolyte."

Alaric stroked the edge of her jaw with one finger. "And do you call the weather or command the hunt in her name?"

"Not yet. But someday I will. In my own name."

"You are very proud," he said softly. "It must be a fine thing, here in the north, to be a witch."

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"Of course."

He slipped his fingers into her hair, to let the glossy tresses slide like silken ribbons across the back of his hand. "Did you know, fair Zavia, that in the south, witches are feared and even hated? That sometimes they are hunted down and killed because folk cannot rest easy feeling their power?"

She frowned a trifle. "Are there songs that say such things?"

"I have seen it myself."

The frown deepened. "But why? Magic is so . . . useful."

"Useful for good, and for evil. In the south they fear the evil more than they desire the good."

"What fools they are."

"I've often thought so myself." He curled a lock of hair about one finger and brushed her cheek with it. "And what magic do you know, O acolyte?"

She lowered her eyes. "If truth be told, not really so much. But if I needed it, my mother would help."

"Even to win me?"

"An easy thing for her."

"I've not seen this mother of yours yet, I think. Someone would have pointed her out to me, surely."

"At calving time she visits all the fires, to heal the sick and cure the unlucky. You'll meet her when Simir's band is ready to start north."

"I look forward to it."

She cupped his chin in her hand and tipped his head back. "Will I need her help, my minstrel?"

"Not you," he whispered, and pulled her tight to him once more.

ALARIC SPENT most of the next day in Zavia's tent. Some of the time, in that leather-bound closeness, with the sun blotted out by the tight-laced hides and only the glow of the oil lamp to show him Zavia's face, he sang. Sad songs and merry ones he sang, softly, sweetly. But most of the time there was need for more than music between him and Zavia, and he pushed the lute aside.

Toward sunset, the smell of cooking venison, and Alaric's own sense of debt to the high chief, lured the new lovers out to the fire. The judging done for the day, Simir was laughing there with half a dozen companions; when he saw Alaric, he made room on his carpet for the minstrel — room and to spare for two.

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No secrets in a nomad band, thought Alaric.

Gilo was there, in the tight cluster of his brothers, on the far side of the flames. They turned their backs to the minstrel and Zavia.

"A long day," Simir was saying as Alaric settled the lute on his knees. "Sometimes I think the calving makes my nomads as nervous as it does their deer. They fight at the slightest excuse. But tomorrow it ends, and I return to the lesser task of leading my own small band. Tomorrow, minstrel, we start north." He gave Alaric a long, piercing look. "You have not changed your mind about coming along?"

Alaric glanced at Zavia. "No, good Simir," he said firmly. "I have not changed my mind."

Simir clapped him on the knee. "Then give us a song about travel, to give us spirit for the journey."

Alaric obliged with a tale of merchant caravans crossing the great desert, and another of a voyage to a land of silver palaces under the sea. Both were fanciful stories, with as much of fable to them as of truth.

When the last chord had died away, Simir said, "Well done, minstrel. And yet . . . these are strange songs for the nomads of the north. What do we know of endless sand or tropic oceans? Have you nothing suited to our winter snows? To our rootless life?"

Alaric shook his head apologetically. "I fear not, sir. It is all so new to me. But I do hope to invent something soon."

"Then sing another song of the mountains, like the one of the eaglet. Some of us, at least, know the mountains well."

There were murmurs in the company at that.

Alaric hesitated.

"Surely you have such a song," said Simir, his voice coaxing. "Surely you were inspired by the heights, the beauties, the dangers. Who could travel the mountains without feeling them speak to his heart? If I were a singer, I know they would inspire me."

"You say you know them well," said Alaric.

"I do. And so do some of the others."

"The mountains are harsh," Alaric said.

"Yes," said Simir. "Few here doubt that."

He took a deep breath. "I have a song for you, then. Of the beauties and the dangers of your mountains." And he closed his eyes as he bent to the lute.

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"The land is fair where the Red Lord reigns;
My love is there, her heart in chains;
Sometimes she sleeps, sometimes she weeps,
Sometimes she drinks the wine of pain."

It was a simple tale of a mother's loss, a father's grief, a daughter's death. A simple tale of people trapped, by their own resignation, in the power of a madman. In detail, a fiction. Yet behind the words lay horrors real as the fire that reddened his eyelids; the very melody seemed to conjure up the Red Lord's evil smile, the smile that fed on human pain. Whether his eyes were closed or no, the song made Alaric see again the woman, his fellow prisoner, tortured so near to death by her lord that she begged for the mercy of oblivion. The lute strings sang under his fingers, but he felt again the yielding of her breastbone as he plunged his sword into her heart. And the greatest horror of all was that the Red Lord paid, and his people accepted that payment; in exchange for the blood of their own, he gave them security, and wine.

It was a fearful song, but they had asked for something of the mountains, and he had always known, since the first words had come to him among the heights, that he would have to sing it for someone, someday. By the final verse he was weeping, and no matter how deep he breathed, his voice was unsteady.

"If you would sleep in the Red Lord's Reach,
To raise your grain and lambs in peace,
Give life for life, come pay the price,
And you will find his wine is sweet."

Alaric opened his eyes, his vision blurred by tears. Someone was holding a cup of deer's-milk wine in front of him. Simir. He took it gratefully and drank.

"So you know him," Simir said quietly.

Alaric nodded.

"We wondered if you had passed that way. It's the easiest route through the mountains. The caravans used to take it. Since he became their lord, of course, none have gotten through to us."

There were murmurs about the circle, nodding heads.

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"I was the lucky traveler," Alaric said, his voice steadying slowly. "I escaped. But not before I saw . . . too much." He looked at Simir. "You are the bandits he protects them from?"

"We were. Or rather, some of these men you see here were. I was not. No. I was a soldier of the Red Lord." He nodded slowly. "A long time ago."

Alaric stared at him, speechless.

"You are not the only one to escape the valley. There have been others. But you and I, we are the only ones to come north out of the mountains." He picked up his own cup and drank deep. "Your tale could almost be my own. Except that the one I lost was my wife. I was his man until then. He was a great leader, he could wring the last dram of strength from a man, and he was wily to put the fox to shame. I was there the last time we had to turn the bandits back. The last time we took so many foreign prisoners." He drank again and then held the cup between his two big hands. "He had a way of making them last, minstrel. He could spin a prisoner's agony out for weeks. But when they were all gone, he would be restless, and eventually he would need to choose . . . a prisoner from among his own." He looked down into the cup. "As his man, I never thought about their little lives. They never mattered to me. Until he chose my darling."

Like the barest breath of wind, Alaric sighed, "Simir." He glanced at the other listeners gathered round; there was no surprise on any face. They had heard this tale before.

"I tried to kill him, minstrel. He'll bear the mark of my knife on his throat forever. But he was the stronger. And I would have been his prisoner, too, except for my friends among the men. Perhaps they paid the price after I was gone." He shook his head. "When the youngsters offer themselves for the journey to the valley, I always warn them. I know he is still there. If he were dead, we would see the caravans again." He shook his head once more. "I would that none of them ever had to go."

Alaric saw the pressure of Simir's hands on the cup, the whitening of the fingertips. He hesitated, then could not help wondering, "But why do they go, Simir? To steal a few goats?"

Simir looked at Alaric. "In the Red Lord's valley, we feared witches. We had none, but we feared them just the same. Here in the north, we have one, and we value her above all our other possessions. She is a woman of great wisdom, our Kata, and her greatest wisdom is a potion we call the Elixir of Life. It cures the incurable. It prolongs health and strength.

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It has even been known to raise the dead.

"A great potion indeed!"

"But one of the herbs from which it is made grows only in the Red Lord's valley. And so someone must go there to harvest it."

Alaric brushed one string of the lute with a finger, and the sound was low and sweet. "Life for life," he murmured.

"It was not so before the Red Lord."

"And that was . . . the whole of your banditry?"

Simir set his cup down at last and flexed his fingers. "I won't say there have not been a few goats taken along the way. The young are . . . subject to temptation."

"Then why not send someone older and wiser?"

"The old and wise have families to look after."

"The old and wise are over-cautious!" That was Gilo's voice, loud and sudden enough to make all eyes turn to him. He stepped between his father and the fire and stood with his fists on his hips. "Only the young have the courage to cross the mountains and steal from the Red Lord. The old and wise — are afraid."

"For good reason," his father said mildly.

"If they were not, they would strike at the Red Lord's valley. Can he still be on his guard against us after all these years? No, we have lulled him with our restraint, and now we can pluck him like an overripe apricot. I would lead the fight, gladly. I would take him in my own hands, and I would not be satisfied with a scar on his neck, not I!" And he clenched his fists as if the Red Lord's throat were already between them.

Simir looked up at his son, and then at the seated company. "It is good, I think, that the young do not make our decisions."

"You think too highly of him, father," Gilo said. "No man can stand undefeated forever."

Simir nodded. "I hope you will remember that when you are high chief."

Gilo looked from one face to another in the gathering. "How many years has it been since we last lost a harvester? Nine years. Nine long years since last the Red Lord heard from us. He doesn't know our strength." Then he glared down at Alaric. "Unless this one goes back to tell him."

An indrawn breath, soft as the crackle of the fire, swept the company, though not all turned their eyes to Alaric.

"What do we know of him?" Gilo demanded. "He could be the Red

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Lord's spy. He has seen us all, he has counted us. And what do we know of him? Nothing!"

Zavia sprang to her feet. "Gilo! You do this because of me! But if you would ever see me smile at you again, you'll stop now!"

Gilo pointed at Alaric. "How has he passed through the valley when no one else has? He's the Red Lord's man, I tell you!"

"Gilo!" With a single stride she reached him, and with a backhand blow across the mouth, she rocked him. He caught her arms then, as the blood began to trickle from his lower lip, and his face was hard, the white teeth showing.

"Enough!" cried Simir, and at his voice half a dozen men leaped to separate the two. "I will have no fighting at my fire!"

"And no lies, either!" cried Zavia.

Simir silenced her with a glance.

Gilo straightened, lifting his head defiantly. "He is a stranger, father. Why should we trust him?"

Simir looked into his son's face. "You heard the song, but you did not *listen*. This is not the Red Lord's man. He understands the pain too well."

"He could have left a hostage behind to guarantee his loyalty." He glanced at Zavia. "Someone he loved."

"Then he is more a fool than you," said Simir, "not to realize there would be no hostage at his return."

Gilo's mouth twisted sullenly. Blood was flowing freely from it now, and he wiped it with the back of one wrist. "Father, you like this minstrel too much."

"I like whom I choose, and to what extent pleases me. We are all free to do that. It would be well for you to remember that, my son."

Without replying, Gilo turned and stalked off, and his brothers hurried to follow him.

After a moment, the high chief looked back at Alaric. "I think we could do with a happier song now, minstrel."

Alaric brushed the lute strings lightly. Then his fingers hesitated. "Thank you for defending me, Simir," he said. "I swear to you, I am not a spy."

Simir smiled. "Zavia's was the more vigorous defense, I thought," and he gestured for her to sit down again. "He is young. Before he can be high chief after me, he will have to learn to judge folk by their hearts, and

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not by his own desires." He shrugged lightly. "But I was a fool at his age, so there is time." Picking up his cup once more, he toyed with it between his two big hands. "You know, minstrel, there is a part of me that wants what he wants. But the cost in life would be . . . high. And I could not ask my people for that price." Then he held his cup out and called for wine. "A happy song, minstrel," he said when he had drunk again. "Something to make us laugh."

After the song there was venison stew to be passed around, and then more songs. Gilo and his brothers had not returned to their father's fire by the time Zavia took Alaric's hand and led him back to her tent.

IN THE morning, he helped her strike the tent while all around them, others were doing the same; the nomad throng, barely thinned by early departures, was seething like a simmering pot, men shouting, women scurrying, children underfoot everywhere, no one still for a moment. Out of this ferment stepped a figure of immense dignity: a tall woman, moving slowly, leading a string of four heavily-laden deer. The chaos parted before her, flowed around her, like a river meeting a rock in its bed. She climbed the gentle rise to Simir's circle, now a circle no longer, and she halted where the fire had been before it was dashed to cold black ashes. Alaric, who had watched her approach, saw her raise an arm, a graceful, beckoning gesture, that brought Simir himself to her side.

Zavia saw where he looked. She tossed her work down and moved to stand beside him, hooking one arm about his waist. She nodded at the woman. "My mother," she said.

Kata was tall and slender and handsome, her face much like Zavia's, but refined with age, the cheeks hollowed out, the chin chiseled free of youth's softness. She wore her hair in two thick braids, each bound with leather, and on her arms were wide leather bracelets inlaid with polished pebbles. In the crook of her left arm she carried a staff taller than herself and carved into fanciful shapes.

"You must meet her," said Zavia. "She will expect it." Taking his hand, she started up the rise.

It was a changed Zavia who introduced them. Gone was the boldness, the self-possession, the pride. She lowered her gaze to speak to her mother.

Like all nomads, Kata had pale eyes, and, looking into them, Alaric had the sensation that they could see deep inside him. Perhaps it was because

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they were so steady, perhaps because around them her face bore no expression.

"I have heard much about you, mintrel," she said, "but I have had no time to come and listen for myself." Her voice was lower than Zavia's, smoother. "You must be a fine singer, though. I see nothing else about you to attract my daughter."

Zavia's hand tightened on his, but she made no sound.

"Ah, Kata," said Simir, "you are unkind." He smiled at Alaric. "He is no bad choice. He has a good heart."

"A strong man is best for a nomad woman," Kata said, "and I see no great strength here. Wait till winter tests him."

"He says he wishes to see the Northern Sea," Simir said.

"Oh?" Kata looked into his eyes again. "Well that can be arranged, if his courage is equal to it."

Alaric tried to smile, but under that unwavering stare it was far from easy. "I will try to be an adequate nomad, good lady. I promise you."

"Oh, don't promise that, minstrel!" said Simir. "Just promise to sing, and we will see to your comfort. You must hear him, Kata, and you will think better of him."

"Perhaps," she said. "For now I have other things to consider. I must speak to you of one of the men in Donril's band. . . ."

She had turned away from Alaric by then, and he had experience enough of great ladies to know that he had been dismissed. He pulled Zavia away, down to her tent site, where a little boy had brought up a pair of deer for her use. Silently, they lashed her goods to the creatures' backs. But now and then, Alaric looked toward Kata, still deep in conversation with Simir, pointing sometimes here or there, as the high chief nodded. And he wondered if perhaps this day he had not met the true lord of the north.

When the deer were laden, Zavia mounted one of them. Alaric leaned against the second and watched the folk around him complete their own packing. Already a few groups had begun to move out, spreading toward the horizon in a slow, dark wave.

"Is your mother the only one who knows how to make the Elixir of Life?" he wondered.

"Yes," said Zavia. "But she will teach me soon."

"You've seen it used, I suppose."

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"I've drunk it myself."

"Have you? And what were you cured of? Or were you raised from the dead?"

"I drank it when I became a woman. All our children drink it when they leave childhood behind. It makes us strong." She hesitated, then looked down at him. "But it doesn't always succeed at raising the dead."

"No?" He smiled at her. "Well, there are always failures in the world."

One of Simir's graybeard companions brought Alaric a riding deer, and shortly afterward the high chief's band, near eight score in all, began its own journey northward on the broad rolling plain of new spring grass.

They made camp in mid-afternoon, on the bank of a north-meandering river. All trace of the other bands had vanished in the distance behind them, and around them, the earth seemed empty, the game frightened off by the approaching herd, the only trees those that grew by the watercourse. As women and children set up the tents and started their fires of dead wood and deer droppings, men took their bows and fanned out in search of wild meat. A few youngsters set hooks in the stream; others scoured the verge for edible plants. The days of feasting on the deer were over; from now on just a few slaughtered animals would be eked out by every possible form of hunting.

Their burdens removed, the deer spread out, grazing avidly under scanty guard. Their masters, however, clustered together, ranging their tents as if there were still a vast multitude surrounding them. Alaric helped Zavia pitch her own tent beside her mother's.

"I have to be here if she needs me," she told him. "At the calving grounds, she always works alone, but now there will be herbs to grind and potions to mix, to replenish her stores. And then there are my lessons. There is so much to learn!"

Whatever need Kata may have had for her daughter, she displayed none of it that afternoon. She went into her tent as soon as three of Simir's graybeards set it up, and she did not come out, even for supper. Before eating his own meal, Simir himself took her a bowl of braised fish.

Kata's tent was the largest of that gathering save for Simir's own; but in his slept a dozen or more, while hers was for one person alone. Yet hers was crowded, for it held the burdens of her four pack-deer. And it was an unusual tent in other ways, with a curious pattern of hexagons, like a

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loose honeycomb, scribed upon its roof, and the ancient six-pointed symbol of the Pole Star, heart of the north, limned in white above its entry flaps; and beneath the Star, to either side of that entry, Kata's carven staff and its identical twin were set hard into the ground, like stern wooden sentinels. Within the tent, she kept a fire, and its steady smoke trickled upward through a roof vent to waft across the encampment, bringing with it a sweet, spicy odor.

Alaric sang that night, and if Kata the witch listened, she did not come out to watch as well.

The next few days passed peacefully, mornings of leisurely travel, afternoons by the river, evenings of laughter and music by the fire. The food continued good, the sun was warm by day, and Zavia was warm by night. If Kata rarely spoke to him, that hardly mattered; she treated everyone else the same. Simir was the only one who truly conversed with her. The high chief himself was friendly as ever, and his company welcomed every song Alaric offered; they never asked him for more than that, for hunting or labor, and everywhere he went among them, there was always a pleasant word for him.

Only the boys, Gilo, Marak, Terevli, looked on him with sullen eyes and turned their backs when he came near.

"They can stay away," said Zavia. "Their time with me is finished."

Alaric smiled, stroking her hair. Outside her tent, he could hear the faint grunting of deer and the sounds of people disposing themselves for the night. Inside, the oil lamp threw the dim shadow of his hand against the nearest slanting wall. "Did all three of them have time with you, sweet Zavia?" he whispered.

She yawned and then settled more closely against him. "They've all seen the inside of this tent."

He slid his fingers between her naked breasts. "Like this?"

She covered his hand with her own. "Yes."

He laughed softly. "Surely not all three at once."

"I never thought the tent was large enough for that." She kissed the tip of his nose. "And I prefer to give all my attention to one man at a time."

"Sweet Zavia," he sighed. "My life here would be quite perfect if not for their jealousy. They make me feel like I have stolen the fairest flower of the north." He kissed her lips, her yielding, parted lips. "And perhaps I have."

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"Once there were others jealous of them," she murmured. "Now they know how it feels to lose something precious. A healthy lesson, I think." And she smiled that triumphant little smile.

Seven days the nomads moved north with the river, seven nights Alaric slept with Zavia. On the eighth afternoon, the chief's sons did not go out with the other hunters. Instead, they sought Alaric, who was by the stream with Zavia, fishing. They were wearing swords at their belts, all three of them, though nomads rarely wore their blades so near to camp.

"Battling a fish, eh?" said Gilo. "The only creature you're fit to battle, I'd say."

Zavia shifted so that her back was squarely to him. Alaric said nothing.

"I know you're afraid of me," Gilo said. "I'll wager you're afraid of my brothers, too. Even little Terevli." And when Alaric still said nothing, he added, "I'm tempted to let Terevli teach you a lesson, minstrel. He'd like that."

Terevli made an affirmative noise.

"You must be strong to live in the north. Show us your strength, minstrel." Gilo's voice hardened. "We've even brought your sword; you won't have to go back to Zavia's tent for it."

The slick sound of a blade being drawn made Alaric turn toward the youngest boy. He saw Terevli holding the finely-worked scabbard in one hand and the bright steel sword in the other — the sword that Alaric had carried long but never drawn in anger.

"It's a fine blade," Gilo said. "The one who bests you will keep it, I think. Choose one of us, minstrel. We're waiting."

Alaric looked from one youth to the next. "I have no desire to fight any of you."

"You think we care about your desires?"

"I am a minstrel, not a fighter."

"A coward, then!"

Alaric smiled slightly. "To some men, that would be a deadly insult. But not to me. I know my limitations."

Gilo strode to Terevli and took the sword from him, sheathed it. "Then you have no need of this weapon, have you? I can't think why you keep it at all, if you fear so much to use it. *I'll* use it, though, and many thanks."

"So you're a thief, are you, Gilo?" Alaric said softly.

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Gilo's mouth twisted in malice. "Do you insult me, stranger?"

"The truth is no insult."

"Then fight me for it!" He threw the sword down on the grass between them. "I'll give you a fair chance to draw it."

Alaric made no move.

"You're a fool, Gilo," said Zavia. She glared at him over one shoulder. "His death won't win me back to you."

"Quiet, woman. This has nothing to do with you."

"No? The minstrel is mine; harm him and you'll never drink the Elixir of Life again."

Gilo's lips pressed hard together for an instant. Then he said, "That would be your mother's choice, not yours. You'll not protect him this time. Fight me, minstrel, or I claim the sword as your default!"

Alaric looked at Zavia, at the proud anger in her face. *Why does this wild creature still choose me?* he wondered. But he knew the answer to that — it stood before him, strong and virile, surely; but hot-headed, arrogant, insufferably imperious to a spirit like Zavia's. She needed a softer mate. *There are few softer than a minstrel,* he thought, *who lives on the sufferance of others.*

"I will not fight you, Gilo," he said quietly. "The sword belongs to me. If you take it, I will tell your father. Let him judge if you have done right."

Gilo growled deep in his throat, then looked to his brothers and signalled sharply with a toss of his head. The three strode away, leaving Alaric's sword lying on the ground.

Zavia reached for the sword herself, then she held it out to Alaric, hilt first. "This is a fine weapon," she said. "Not for an oaf like him."

Alaric took the sword by the scabbard. "Too fine for me, also, but it was a gift, and so I keep it. Sometimes, though, I wish it were something more . . . innocent."

She closed both hands about his arm. "It was proper that you didn't fight for me. I am no man's prize."

He set the sword down in the grass. "That's as well, sweet Zavia, for if you were, I would lose you in an instant."

"You shall not lose me, my Alaric, until I choose to be lost." And she linked her hands behind his neck and kissed him softly on the mouth.

But oh my Zavia, he thought, with her breath warm on his lips, *you*

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have chosen to be lost before. How long shall this last, I wonder?

A fish tugged at his line then and, laughing, they broke apart to pull it in.

IN THE deepest part of the night, Alaric woke suddenly. For an instant, he did not know what had wakened him. Then he realized he had felt the tent flap opening, felt the cool draft of the dark enter. Yet Zavia lay still in the curve of his arm. Instinctively then, he rolled away from her, over the mounded cushions, to the skirts of the tent, which were pegged firmly to the ground. The tiny shelter was suddenly filled with struggling bodies, with thrashing and panting and whispered curses.

Just as suddenly, Alaric was gone.

He appeared by the riverbank, and for a moment he felt bewildered. Under the cool stars was no herd, no nomad camp, just a patch of trampled grass. Then he realized that in his urgency he had traveled to last night's camping place. He stumbled to his feet, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He would have been naked, save that when he had rolled away from Zavia he had taken his cloak, their coverlet, with him, and it was still wrapped about him now.

He knew what had happened, of course. Who else but the three brothers would be paying Zavia's tent such a nocturnal visit? To frighten him, perhaps. More likely to kill him.

I should just go away, he thought. The night air was too cool for comfort; he clutched the cloak about his shoulders. His hands shook a little, but he knew it wasn't from the chill. *Even Zavia isn't worth my life.* And then he felt his heart sink. What if they had hurt her in the confusion?

His reason told him to leave the nomads behind him, to go back to the south, where the forests were lush and the deer were skittish of human beings. He could be there in a heartbeat, and he could find clothing and even another lute with the help of his special talent.

What if they had killed her?

He was at the other riverbank then, the one where Simir's band was camped, because he had to know.

The camp was in an uproar. In the brief time he had been gone, someone had stirred a fire to life, and lit torches, too, and people were com-

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ing out of every tent, talking excitedly.

Somewhere in all the confusion, someone was screaming.

Twisting the cloak about his middle, Alaric ran toward Zavia's tent.

Half the camp was there before him, blocking his path. He began to elbow his way through the throng, then caught sight of Simir's blond head, surrounded by torches, off to the right. Alaric pressed sideways to reach him.

"Simir!"

"Minstrel." The high chief took in his bare shoulders and legs with a single inquiring glance. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. I went for a call of nature, and suddenly there was all this."

With Simir leading the way, Alaric reached the tent. Or what had been the tent, for the whole structure had collapsed, and among the jumbled hides and carpets and cushions were thrashing bodies, though how many was difficult to say. Several voices came from the struggling mass, and one of them was Zavia's, screaming curses.

"Clear this away," Simir shouted, and he set the example by pulling a carpet free of the jumble and tossing it aside. Willing hands took over the task then, and in moments Zavia and Simir's three sons were revealed. Zavia sat striding Gilo, punching him while Marak and Terevli tried to pull her away. Onlookers had trouble in separating the four.

Three knives were found loose among the ruins of the tent.

"What is this?" Simir demanded, when the four young people were standing before him, panting and disheveled. The boys were bruised and bleeding, Gilo's nose smashed, Marak's left eye closed and beginning to swell, Terevli with a knife slash on his right arm. Zavia, naked, stood straight and disdainful, though scrapes across her shoulder, breast, and thigh were oozing blood; she hardly seemed to notice when someone wrapped a fur about her.

Then she saw Alaric and lifted a hand to him, and he went to her and closed her in his arms.

"Gilo," said Simir, pointing at the youth. "Speak."

Blood was streaming down Gilo's face and over the hand he held up to it. "A mistake," he mumbled. "Just a mistake."

"I see that clearly enough," Simir replied. "But how did you make this mistake?"

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Gilo coughed and spat blood and shook his head.

"We were just visiting Zavia," said Marak. "Nothing more."

"And she attacked us," added the youngest boy.

"Visit? Bah!" snapped Zavia. "They came to kill the minstrel."

"It was a friendly visit," said Marak. "We didn't know the minstrel was there."

"And your knives were friendly, too," said Zavia. "Do you take us all for fools?"

"You forced us to draw—"

"Shut up!" roared Gilo. He coughed again, then, and droplets of blood scattered from his nose. "We wanted to frighten him. To make him think again about staying with her." He choked on the last word and spray crimson once more with a fit of coughing.

The crowd swayed back suddenly. Kata had emerged from her tent. She strode a few paces to Simir's side. "Whatever has happened here, this boy needs care. Come," she said, stretching a hand out to Gilo. Without a backward glance, he went with her into her tent.

Simir turned to the remaining boys, cold anger on his face. "You think because he is not one of us that you can do as you please to him? You think because you are my sons that I won't lift a finger? I have not beaten you in some years, but I have not forgotten how. And afterward you will remember to tell your brother what your *mistake* has brought you." To the man beside him, he said, "Bring my rod."

"It was Gilo pressed us to do it!" cried Terevli.

"I shall not forget him. Now, while we wait for the rod, the two of you will put Zavia's tent back together."

"I'm bleeding, Father," said Terevli, holding up his slashed arm. "I need Kata's help."

"Try not to bleed on Zavia's leather," Simir said coldly.

When the tent was set up once more, Simir directed the boys to the fire, where they stripped off their clothing. Naked, they took their blows in alternation, and the sound of the rod on flesh was sharp and rhythmic in the night air. Only once, Terevli cried out.

Though Alaric urged her, Zavia would not go into her tent until the punishment was over, until Simir had stalked back to his own shelter and the boys had crept into their clothes and followed him. Then she pulled the tent flap back.

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"Get a brand from the fire," she whispered, and she slipped inside.

They kindled the oil lamp, and by its flame she inspected her injuries — all were broad rather than deep. Zavia pulled one of the cushions to her, unlaced its edge and raked through its contents. She found a small ceramic pot; inside was a salve which she smeared on her wounds, wincing at its touch.

"I should have killed him," she murmured.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. "He could have killed *you*."

She shook her head. "I wasn't his quarry."

"Still, in the dark, he might have taken you for me."

She looked at him levelly. "If you had stayed, we might have killed him."

"Perhaps it's as well that I wasn't here, then. I don't care for killing."

"You were here," she said, her eyes steady on his. "But you went away."

He shrugged. "When nature calls, we can't deny her. They must not have seen me leave."

"You went away after they were in the tent, my Alaric."

"No, I heard the commotion from the river."

She sighed. "I woke when they started unlacing the entrance. I felt you beside me. Then they leaped in and suddenly you and your cloak were gone. And you didn't get out past them, my minstrel. I won't believe that."

"I wasn't here, Zavia."

"You were here, and then you *weren't* here. You didn't run away. That just wasn't possible. No, you . . . vanished."

"You were dreaming, Zavia."

"I know the difference between dreaming and waking, Alaric."

"But this is absurd." He kept his eyes steady. "I wasn't here. And no one can just . . . vanish."

She touched his naked arm with the flat of her hand, ran her palm down to his elbow. "What a potent skill it is. Little wonder you escaped the Red Lord. How far can you go, my minstrel? Can you cross the mountain? Or is just a little thing, a leap, a short run, a bowshot?"

"Zavia, this is foolish."

Her hand moved upward, to his shoulder, to the back of his neck. "I would learn this skill. It's a thing a witch should know. You'll teach me, won't you, my Alaric?"

"Zavia, I don't have any such —"

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"You'll teach me, surely," she whispered, moving closer to him. Her free hand slid to his waist and tugged the cloak loose. "You'll teach your Zavia, my sweet minstrel." And then she pulled him down on the cushions, down on her smooth, warm flesh.

"He denies it, Mother." Zavia sat on her knees in the dimness of her mother's tent, her eyes downcast. "For two days he has denied it. But I know what happened."

Kata sat beyond her fire, her hands busy with something her daughter could not quite see. "Perhaps he was right," she said. "Perhaps you dreamed it. This is a strange and potent skill you speak of. Why would he wander the world as a minstrel when he could use it to live in luxury? He could steal anything, he could cow anyone, and yet he is nothing and no one."

"Mother, I swear to you, I was awake. He was touching me, and then he rolled away and was gone. The tent was pegged fast to the ground. There was no way out but where the boys were coming in, not until they brought the tent down." She raised her eyes just a trifle. "Ask them if he was there when they burst in."

Kata was silent a moment. Then she said, "Perhaps I will."

Zavia rose a little on her knees. "Mother, this would be such a valuable skill. You can pry it from him, I know you can."

"Possibly."

"And I brought it to you, Mother. Surely that shows I'm worthy of your trust. Worthy to do more than grind a few herbs." Her voice became plaintive. "I will work hard, Mother, I promise you. Only teach me. Please."

For just an instant, Kata looked up from her task, meeting her daughter's eyes above the fire, and Zavia flinched. "You are too young and too angry, child," said the nomad's witch. Her voice was as firm and emotionless as when she spoke to anyone else, no special warmth for the flesh of her own flesh, no hint of intimacy. "When I judge you are ready, you will begin to learn."

Zavia bowed her head. "Yes, Mother," she whispered.

"Now fetch Gilo to me, and we shall see how matters stand with your minstrel."

Much to Alaric's relief, Zavia finally gave over asking him to teach her his witch's skill. He could see by her eyes, though, that she still didn't

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accept his denials. Perhaps that was because she was a witch herself, he thought, or would be, one day, and was accustomed to the idea of magic. Almost, because she seemed so approving, he told her the truth. Almost. But he stopped himself, because nothing good had ever come of revealing himself. In time, Zavia's memory of that night would fade, and eventually she might even come to believe that she had really dreamed his disappearance.

He was at the fire singing for Simir when he saw Gilo slip into Kata's tent, and as the afternoon wore on, Marak and Terevli visited her also, one by one. He supposed they were seeking treatment for their injuries. Gilo's was the worst, of course. He walked about holding a huge poultice to his nose, and over the top of it, his eyes peered out, rimmed in black bruise. He spoke to no one, not even his brothers, and he stayed far away from Zavia. The other boys trailed him like a pair of dogs, but moving gingerly, obviously feeling their father's beating. Occasionally one would look at Alaric, but mostly they kept their backs to him.

That night, as he and Zavia walked toward her tent arm in arm, he heard a quiet voice call his name.

It was Kata. She stood at the entry of her own tent. "Come, Alaric," she said. "I wish to speak to you."

Zavia's hands tightened on his arm for just a moment. Then she let him go; she even seemed to give him a little push in her mother's direction.

He looked back at her, but she said nothing.

Kata held the flap of her tent aside and waved him in.

He had only glimpsed this place before. Now he was enveloped by it, and he felt as if he had stepped into a world far beyond that of the nomads. It was a rich tent, richer by far than Simir's, its leathern walls hidden behind patterned hangings, its floor covered with thick carpets, and high-piled with cushions of ocher, citron, and crimson. The fire, blazing in a shallow bronze bowl, crackled with strange colors, now blue, now green, now red as the sunset sky, and it gave off a thin plume of smoke that seemed to fill the tent with the thick sweet smell of spices. Kata let the entry flap close on the last cool breath of the evening and, sliding past him, beckoned him to a place by the fire.

"You are a strange one, Alaric the minstrel," she said, sitting down quite near him. Behind her, the cushions were mounded especially high;

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she tossed two of them aside to reveal a small wooden chest, its dark, polished surfaces inlaid again and again with the six-pointed symbol of the Pole Star. Tipping back the lid, she drew out a ceramic flask and two cups so small they could scarcely hold a single mouthful each. Unstoppering the flask, she poured pale liquid into the cups and offered one to Alaric.

"Thank you," he murmured. The liquid was transparent, faintly pink in color. "What is this?"

"An herbal distillation," said Kata, and she drank her own share in one swallow. When he hesitated still, she added. "Not poison, minstrel. I promise you that."

"Oh, I never thought it, lady. What reason would you have to poison me?"

Her gaze was steady. "My daughter's life is her own, minstrel. I would not poison her choice merely because I would have chosen differently."

As when they had met, he found himself unable to smile properly before her pale, expressionless eyes. He raised the cup to her health and then sipped. To his surprise, the liquid had hardly any taste, and less substance; indeed, it seemed to evaporate on the tongue and never reach the throat at all. And now the cup was empty — that single cautious taste, he realized, had drained it.

"You are a strange one," Kata repeated, taking the cup from him. "As a skilled singer, you could be living softly in the south, in a grand house, with a grand patron. You could wear jewels and gold and eat the finest of delicacies. Yet here you are among us, perhaps on a quest for the Northern Sea."

He shrugged. "As good a goal as any, lady Kata."

"A foolish goal. There is nothing in the Northern Sea but ice and death. I know. I have been there."

He held a hand out to her fire, disrupting the rise of the smoke, making it eddy and swirl. "I am a wanderer, lady," he said. "The Northern Sea or the southern desert — they are all one to me. I travel, I see new sights, I invent new songs. I have never found a place that held me for long." He watched the firelight play on his palm, flushing the skin now blue, now green, now red as the sunset sky. "It seems I am a nomad in my heart."

"A nomad follows the same trail year after year, minstrel. He knows what lies ahead of him as well as he knows what lies behind."

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Alaric shook his head. "Not I." The varicolored flames were beautiful, he thought, like bright draperies rippling in a draft, like skirts swaying with their wearer's walk. They seemed to pull at him, to promise him, as if within their light he could find some long-sought truth. He leaned closer to them, and closer still, till their heat licked at his face.

Kata caught at his shoulders, and he tore his eyes from the flames and looked at her. He saw her wreathed in smoke, he saw a thick pall of smoke filling the whole tent, blotting out the walls and the carpets and the cushions. And he felt the smoke inside himself, as if he were made of it, as if the slightest breeze would blow him away. He reached for her, and she was solid between his hands, solid in a world made of smoke.

"Look at my eyes," she said in a smooth, low voice, and her eyes were like pools of water from whose surface mist was rising. "What are you running from?" she asked him, and yet it was not a question. It was a command.

"Running?" he murmured. And then he could almost feel himself running, running through the smoke, and far behind lay all the places, all the people he had ever known, calling to him. Dall the minstrel, his friend and teacher, calling from the grave; Solinde, his first love, from her tower window; friends and enemies, high-born and low; all of them, even the woman whose name he had never known, whose blood would always be on his hands, though she had begged him to spill it. But he never looked back, because he knew that close behind him followed death — death to the witch who could travel with a wish, death by the arrow, the knife, silent and sudden. And so he ran, hiding his witch's power, ever onward, ever homeless.

"But you use it?" Kata whispered.

Had he spoken? The smoke was thick around him, and he felt as though he were floating on a sea of fog.

"Even though you would hide your power," Kata whispered, "you use it sometimes when others are watching."

"To save my life," he said. "As a startled man would raise his hand to ward off a blow, I use it."

"As you used it to escape the high chief's sons."

"Yes."

He felt her hands on his face. "You are just a boy," she whispered. "You are nothing." Her hands slid downward, over his chest, to his thighs. He

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shivered under that sweeping touch. He knew indeed that he was nothing, that for all the years of wandering, for all the places and people he had seen, he had learned nothing. *She* was wisdom; he could see it in her eyes, he could feel it in her touch. She was the infinite wisdom of the north.

She was pushing him back now, back against the cushions, and her cool hands were unlacing his trews. He tried to shrink from her, but could not. She was the cold north, the wind from the ice, the winter darkness. Her naked flesh was frost against his own, but it claimed him, and the sea of fog became a sea of ice, the Northern Sea itself, and he was drowning in it, helpless.

"You are mine, now, Alaric," she whispered as the sea closed over him. "Mine."

HE WOKE groggily. He lay on his back, and above him, rainbows danced wildly. With an effort, he focused his eyes, and the rainbows coalesced into the gleam of multicolored flames on the tent ceiling. He rolled to his side and pushed himself up on one elbow. His naked body seemed twice its natural weight.

Kata sat on the other side of the fire, fully dressed, watching him. "Drink from that flask," she said, gesturing toward his feet. "You'll feel better."

He glanced downward, saw a leather bottle such as all the nomads carried. But he shrank from it, pulling his feet away as if it would burn them.

"It's only deer's-milk wine," she murmured.

His clothes lay tumbled on the cushions beside him. He dressed hurriedly, tying the laces tight, as if that could shut the woman, and the memory of her cold, cold flesh, away.

"Yesterday you did not believe in magic," she said and, catching his gaze with her own, holding it as a predator holds the gaze of its prey, made him shudder. "You were a witch yourself, but you scoffed at every other form of magic." She smiled slowly, and it was a terrible smile of triumph and possession. Beside it, Zavia's smile had been nothing, less than nothing.

He knew the tent flap was behind him, knew he could reach it and be outside in the clean, fresh air in a moment, and yet he could not move, could not even look at it over his shoulder. His voice was hoarse when

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he spoke. "I would not scoff now, lady."

The smile faded at last, replaced by that careful lack of expression, that cool, steady dignity that did not betray the mind behind it. "You have no secrets from me now, Alaric the minstrel. I know your whole life. Your loves. Your fears. Your shames. You are even less fit than I thought to be my daughter's love. But if you would stay with us, I will find some use for you."

"Some use . . . ?" he echoed.

"They all serve me," she said, "in one way or another. And I serve them. Don't be afraid, boy. I will not ask for more than you can give. It is a pity, though, that you cannot teach me your special skill."

"My lady—"

"Don't bother denying it, minstrel. I told you, I know everything. From your little love Solinde to your coward's fear of the Red Lord. You could have killed him — you, of all people. But you were afraid of death. That's not an unnatural fear. Do you think anyone breathes who doesn't know it? Some show it less, that's all. But you could have killed him, I think, and escaped with your life. There's where your cowardice showed. You let your fear keep you from acting for the good of the many."

He swallowed thickly. "They wouldn't have wanted it, lady. They needed him to keep them safe. They were willing to pay his price for that."

"So the deer needs the herder," said Kata, "even though he may slaughter it someday."

"Lady, who am I to turn their lives upside down—"

"Who are you to do justice? Indeed, you are only a minstrel. And will you run from me now, Alaric, so ill-named?"

He wrenched his gaze from her at last and looked down at the carpet beneath his feet. "Lady, I fear you."

"That is as it should be."

"Will you tell the others about me?"

"Do you wish me to?"

He shook his head. "I am not a witch."

"You cannot deny the name, Alaric."

"I *do* deny it. I want to live my life as an ordinary man. If I must serve you lady, let it be with ordinary skills, with the strength of my arms or with my songs."

"Look at me, minstrel."

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Almost against his will, he looked into her pale eyes, their pupils like dark pits leading deep into her skull. Smoke drifted about her — thin blue smoke, translucent this time, like a nimbus of dawn mist over a river.

"You can run if you wish," she whispered. "But if you stay with us, you are mine."

He felt her cold again, as if it moved out from her body in waves and enveloped him, making him shudder in spite of the fire. He wanted to leave. He wanted to run from her certainty, from her power. But he could not. She held him, with her eyes, her will, her word.

"Go now," she said, "and make your choice."

As if a chain had snapped between them, he staggered back and, groping blindly behind himself, found the tent flap. He nearly fell outside.

Daylight.

The camp was awake and bustling, some tents already down, pack deer standing ready for the day's loads. Alaric squinted against the sunlight. He still felt woozy. Someone caught his arm. Zavia.

He flinched at her touch. For an instant, he saw that her eyes were like her mother's, and he felt the cold sweep over him again.

"Are you ill?" she said.

He shook his head. The feeling was passing. Yes, her eyes were like her mother's, but still young, still innocent. The acolyte, he thought. No, here was no acolyte, not of *that* master. Here was simply a passionate young woman with grand dreams. He wondered if she even understood what she aspired to. He closed his arms about her, kissed her there in the bright sunlight. Her mouth was soft and clinging and flooded him with warmth.

What shall I do? he wondered, holding her fast against him.

"We have to pack up," she whispered.

A dozen people spoke to him as he and Zavia took the tent down. A dozen smiling, friendly people. Some of them were helping Kata to load her deer.

He stayed away from her, stayed at the tail of the line as the nomads moved north, while she rode near the front with Simir. And though Zavia tried to converse with him as they ambled along through the greening grass, he would not speak. He would not tell her what had happened in her mother's tent, nor how it made him feel. He would not tell her that he still didn't know whether to stay or to go, to love or to fear, to serve

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or to fly free. *Cold or warm,* he thought; *is it possible to be both at once?*

He sat by Simir's fire for a long time that night. Till the embers dulled to red, till the last of the graybeards went to bed. Till even Zavia, sensing his mood, retired to her tent without him. Only he and Simir were left at last, alone among the silent tents, under the distant stars. Alaric had set the lute aside some time since, and he sat with his arms about his knees, his eyes seeing the embers, the past, and nothing at all.

In a soft voice, the high chief asked, "Do you plan to stay by the fire all night, minstrel?"

Alaric put his head down on his knees. "I don't know. Perhaps."

Simir laid a hand on his shoulder. "Did you and Zavia . . . quarrel?"

Alaric shook his head.

"I thought . . . perhaps . . . because of her mother. It was soon to call you to her tent."

Alaric turned his face toward Simir; he could barely see the man, by starlight and ember-glow. "Soon?"

"Soon after you and Zavia became lovers. She usually waits till a man's first child is born."

"Waits? To do what?"

Simir paused. "Didn't she give you hunting magic?"

Alaric raised his head. "And how would she do that?"

"Didn't she take you to her bed?"

"Is that how it's done?"

"She kept you all night. Everyone assumed. . . ."

Alaric glanced toward the place where her tent stood, a shadow of shaddows. "She didn't mention hunting magic. We spoke of other things. She said . . . she might have certain tasks for me. I don't know what they would be."

Simir's hand tightened on his shoulder. "If she wants you to go back to the valley, I won't allow it. We have hunters, and brave young men in plenty, but only one minstrel."

Alaric sighed. "She thought . . . I might be leaving soon."

Simir's arm dropped away. The night was very quiet for a moment. At last he said, "Why would she think that?"

"I've thought it myself."

He heard Simir climb to his feet, then felt the big hand on his arm, urging him to rise, too.

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"Come, minstrel. These are not things we should speak of while others are close enough to hear. Come walk by the river."

The reflected stars were like drops of silver scattered over the surface of the water, their images shimmering now and then with the breath of the wind. *Like my life,* Alaric thought; *placid for a time, and then suddenly convulsed by some outside force.*

Simir was a shadow moving beside him, while the river flowed deep and sluggish to one side and the tents receded in the distance behind. "Something is wrong, minstrel," said the high chief.

Alaric had to laugh ruefully. "Aside from your sons hating me, what could be wrong?"

"They'll stay away from you now."

"And your witch thinks I am her personal property."

"She thinks that of everyone, Alaric. It's nothing."

"To you, perhaps."

"Are you restless, minstrel? Are you . . . sorry that you took up with us?"

"No, Simir, no. You've been good to me. You're good, kind people, and I find it difficult to imagine you swooping down on the Red Lord's valley to lay waste and leave carnage behind you." He smiled slightly, into the darkness. "All except your sons. I can see them doing it easily."

"It was long ago," said Simir.

"I like your people. Most of you. And Zavia — perhaps I love her. But I fear her mother."

"She is a fearsome woman."

Alaric sighed. "Has she ever given you hunting magic, Simir?"

"Why, yes."

"And . . . what was the experience like?"

Simir hesitated. "It was very pleasant."

"And afterward . . . did you ever want to go back for more?"

The high chief's laugh was deep. "I have. Many times."

Alaric shook his head. No, Simir had not had the same experience. Her magic had been something more familiar for him. *Go back for more!* he thought. *No, not in a thousand years.* "I am not used to witches," he said aloud. "We fear them in the south. It is a hard habit to break." There was no way to explain his feelings to Simir, no way short of telling the tale that Kata now knew. He could almost feel her looking over his shoulder at this very moment. Would he always feel that, here in the north? Would

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he always wonder what way she would find to use her knowledge? To hold him hostage with it, as she had held him with her eyes?

"You have been very kind to me, Simir. I like you very much."

"Are you trying to say goodbye, minstrel?"

Alaric felt an ache begin, deep inside him. He had never had a home. And yet, with the nomads, he had known kinship, of one wanderer for others, and a sense of comfort that transcended the petty hatreds of Gilo and his brothers. "I don't know, Simir. I want to stay. Truly, I do."

"Then stay. Kata won't harm you, I promise."

"Ah, Simir, what is harm?"

"She has our good at heart, Alaric. She takes care of us. We don't fear her, and you—"

His voice cut off suddenly in a half-stifled cry of surprise, and then someone had seized Alaric from behind, an arm about his throat, choking his breath away. Alaric twisted, staggered, and felt the flat of a knife blade skitter along his shoulder. And then the riverbank gave way beneath his feet, and he and his assailant tumbled into the water. The shock of the fall made his attacker loose his grip, and Alaric thrust away, diving for the gravel bed of the stream.

An eyeblink later, he was crawling up the bank, coughing, gasping, elsewhere.

He lurched to his feet. He was safe. He had run, as he always ran, and once more his power had saved him. He took a deep and ragged breath. He was safe.

But Simir was back there, at that other spot beside the river. Struggling, alone, in the dark. *He has been good to me,* Alaric thought.

A heartbeat later, he was there.

It was a quiet fight, two slim shadows against a bigger one, the only sounds those of hard breathing and scuffling feet, and a distant splashing from the river. They hung on Simir's arms like dogs on a bear. Alaric leaped at the nearest, tore him away from the high chief, and instantly slipped out of reach in his special fashion. The darkness was his friend. He was a wraith, here, there, never where his quarry clutched. The one from the river stumbled into the fight, but Alaric took him on as well in the friendly dark. Then Simir came to him, and with a pair of mighty blows knocked his assailants to the ground.

"Minstrel," he said, his breath coming hard, "are you hurt?"

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Alaric bent over, bracing his hands on his thighs. He felt a little dizzy, and his shoulder was beginning to throb. "I don't think so," he gasped.

"Ho, a torch for Simir!" the high chief shouted, and his voice boomed toward the camp. "A torch!"

Sounds of movement came from the tents, and then a brand flared, and another and another. Holding them high, half a dozen of Simir's men followed the trail of his voice.

The light revealed Gilo, Marak, and Terevli lying on the riverbank. After a moment, Gilo raised his head. His still-swollen face was bleeding, and in his bruise-rimmed eyes was a deep and defiant ugliness.

Simir kicked him in the side, hard enough to make him grunt. "So you would be high chief now, would you? No need to wait till I'm too old." He kicked the youth again. "You think they would follow you? As those two dolts do?" He stared down at his eldest son, and his face was grim. "I told myself that time would give you wisdom. I told myself that you were not really a fool. You have shown me how mistaken I was." He turned to one of the torchbearers. "Bind them. In the morning I will give my judgment. Come, minstrel; a cup of wine would not be amiss now."

Alaric found himself walking a trifle unsteadily, and his wet clothes made him shiver.

"You're wounded," said Simir.

Alaric looked to where Simir's eyes were focused and found that the collar of his tunic had been ripped across, and a ragged cut on his shoulder welled blood.

"Kata must bind this up," said the high chief.

"No! No, it's nothing, I'll see to it myself. But what of you, Simir?"

"A leather jerkin turns aside a poorly-used blade. You should have been wearing one yourself instead of this thin stuff."

Alaric smiled feebly. "I'm too fast for a knife."

"Fast indeed," said Simir, and he slung Alaric's good arm over his shoulder and helped him toward the fire. "But for your courage and quickness, I would be dead."

Alaric shook his head. "You were a match for all of them."

"I think not."

"Well, remembering all that courage is making me very weak now." He sank gratefully to the carpet in front of Simir's tent.

A few people were looking out of their tents curiously; Simir beckoned

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to one of them and sent for Zavia. "This wound needs care," he said, "and if you won't have the mother, then the daughter must serve."

Zavia was livid. "I'll kill him for this," she hissed.

"It wasn't Gilo," said Alaric.

"He planned it."

"The other two aren't innocent, my Zavia." The salve stung sharply as she spread it over the cut. "He couldn't have moved without them."

"And they wouldn't have moved without him. Not those two."

"I'll deal with all three," Simir said firmly. "And you won't kill him, Zavia. You won't have to."

The next day, the nomads did not take up their northward journey. Instead, they gathered in conclave, eight score men, women, and children, all their attention on the three bound youths who sat by Simir's fire. Even Kata came out of her tent, to watch the proceedings with pale, expressionless eyes.

Simir stood, tall and impassive, his thick arms crossed over his broad chest, waiting till the murmuring of the crowd should cease. At last he spoke, and the few whispers that remained died away at his first word.

"You know my sons," he said, not shouting, but with a carrying voice. "My sons Gilo, Marak, and Terevli. Last night they tried to kill me. As you see, they failed. They were proper sons once. Though they have not pleased me much in recent years, I have tried to be lenient with them, because they are my flesh and blood. Now there must be an end to leniency. If any of them would speak his mind before I pass judgment on them, let him do so."

"Father, you misunderstand completely!" said Marak. "It was the stranger attacked you, the minstrel. We were only trying to beat him off!"

Simir did not even glance at him. "Marak is always ready with a lie," he said. "He thinks I didn't notice that his blows were aimed at me. And poor Terevli — surely he will blame everything on Gilo; he always does." He looked at the boy, the youngest of the three, but Terevli's sullen face was downcast. "Perhaps only Gilo will have the courage to admit his crime."

Gilo stared up at his father. His battered face would have been pitiable had the eyes not been so defiant.

"Gilo?" said Simir.

Gilo's mouth twisted. "Do what you will with me, Father. You have found another to take my place."

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Simir gazed down on him for a long moment. Then he said, "You are the ringleader. Yours must be the greater punishment."

"Will you kill me yourself, Father?"

Slowly, Simir shook his head. "No, Gilo, someone else shall have that pleasure."

Alaric felt Zavia's hand tighten on his own. He glanced at her and saw that little smile of triumph on her lips; he felt a shiver climb his back. *No,* he thought, *he wouldn't do that.*

Simir went on. "You have told us many times how you yearn to meet the Red Lord. Now you shall have your wish. You shall be taken to his valley and left there naked and weaponless, bound fast to a tree. I have no doubt he will find you soon enough." He turned to the other boys. "And you two shall leave Simir's band, and if any of us ever sees you again, I will count your lives forfeit. From this moment, you are no longer my sons."

The crowd exhaled a collective breath, and Alaric wondered if they had expected to see an execution or three that day. Beside him, Zavia was clearly disappointed, her shoulders slumping.

"But I will have another son," Simir said, "if he wishes it." He turned to face Alaric, and he stretched out his hand. "I owe my life to the minstrel. I would have *him* as my son."

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Alaric's mouth was suddenly very dry. His shoulder throbbed, and he felt very tired; he had hardly slept at all that night. "This is a kind offer, Simir," he said. "But you would be disappointed in me as a son. I am only a minstrel. Nothing more."

"You have a special strength, Alaric. I owe it my life. We may have more need of it someday."

Alaric looked up into his face. *Does he know? Did he see, last night? No, I was a shadow among shadow. What could he possibly have seen?*

He had not noticed Kata glide up, but there she was, at his elbow, holding a shallow bronze cup in her two hands.

"Alaric," said Simir, taking the cup, "this is the Elixir of Life. We of the north drink it when we enter the adult life of the band. I drank it when they took me in, so many years ago. Now you shall drink, and become our brother."

He glanced from Kata to Simir. *Has she told him?* The liquid in the cup was dark and oily and gave off a pungent smell.

"I have never had a home," he said.

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"We welcome you," said Simir.

"We welcome you," said Kata.

He looked over his shoulder, at Zavia, who stood in the crowd and smiled; so proud she was of him, so proud. He looked to the three bound youths, who stared back with hatred in their eyes. He looked at Simir and saw . . . pleading. He was a man who had lost so much he held dear. *Would this have happened if I hadn't come!* Alaric had no answer for that, or none that eased his conscience. He closed his eyes and thought of a forest glen in the south. He could be there in an instant. Or he could walk away, out of their lives, and never be seen in the north again. *What do I care for him, after all! I could say goodbye and wander on. As I always have.* He opened his eyes and looked at the cup, at the oily dark liquid. *Or I could stay, for him, for Zavia.* He looked at Simir again, and remembered all his kindness, his friendship. Perhaps he did know. And still he offered welcome. And Kata . . . Kata, whose magic lay in herbal distillations and in her compelling eyes — Kata stood beside him in the bright day, and without her smoke and her fire and her potions she was not so terrible, save in his memory; she was, instead, a creature of the natural world just as he was; and he knew, glancing at her, that he could run from her now, that nothing would hold him back. He could run. If he wanted to.

Alaric's shoulder throbbed, and he was very tired, in his body, in his mind — tired of saying goodbye, tired of wandering alone, tired of having no one and nothing. *Not for them,* he thought at last. *For me.*

Gravely, he took the cup and drank. The taste was pungent as cloves and faintly sweet. It seemed to flood through him, filling him up, stomach, heart, head, to the very tips of his fingers. The throbbing in his shoulder faded away. And the weariness seemed to go with it. As if he had never noticed it before, he suddenly felt the sunlight on his face, spring sunlight, fresh and warm.

"I have been raised from the dead," he whispered.

Kata took the cup. "You will heal quickly now."

Simir smiled at Alaric and said, "And you have healed me already."

Then Zavia was beside him, kissing his cheek, and all the rest of the band pressed forward with congratulations and good wishes for their new member. And everyone seemed to have forgotten completely the three boys who waited sullenly for their fates.

(continued next month)

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 45

Gadzeeks! Great minds do indeed work in the same track. You were asked to send us variations of SF titles in which one word was replaced by a close homonym. There were *many* duplicates: FARMHAND'S FREEHOLD, ENEMA MINE, WHORE OF THE WORLDS, SNEAKERS FOR THE DEAD, THE HABIT, RINGWORM, 2001: A SPACE ODDITY, NAKED ROMANCES, and, overwhelmingly — for you, Harlan — DANGEROUS VIRGINS. *We* loves ya, baby.

The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

UNACCOMPANIED SINATRA

DES MOINES IS A HARSH MISTRESS

TEA WITH THE BLACK DRAG QUEEN

A SARONG FOR LYA

THE LUFTHANSA DARKNESS

STOLEN FECES

THE MERTZES OF VENUS

KILL THE DEB

BJORN: THE BLUE AVENGER RISING
Jeff Grimshaw
Milford, NJ

SECOND PRIZE

BABY IS THROUGH

DUNE MESSINESS

THE COD EQUATIONS

BLADDER MUSIC

FLORINE FOR ALGERNON

THE TOADS MUST ROLL
Martin S.Kohl
Knoxville, TN

RUNNERS UP

CATTLECAR GALACTICA

GIBBERISH IN THE OUTBACK

THE WHIMPER OF WHIPPED DUCKS

RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMEN

THE MOON IS A HARSH MATTRESS
Patricia Warrick
Fort Bliss, TX

NINE TEENS, EIGHTY WHORES

HELEN, OH BOY!

THE LEFT HAND OF DARTMOUTH

THE SEARCH FOR SCHLOCK

THE CASTRATED MAN
Crewel Punz, Inc.
Billings, MO

HONORABLE MENTIONS

THE WEE PUN SHOPS OF ISHER

I HAVE A MOUTH AND I MUST PREEN

STAR TREK: THE NUDE GENERATION
Agustin Goba
Redondo Beach, CA

HELL OF A COLD WINTER

I WILL FEAR NO DRIVEL

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TO YOUR SCATTERED POTTIES GO
Jon & Holly Jackson
Vine Grove, KY

DO RAM DROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?

THE SARONGS OF DISTANT GIRTH
Jospeh S. Potts
Irwin, PA

THE VILE LINT MAN
William H. Garsi
New York, NY

THE RICH BIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY
Jade Chin
Brooklyn, NY

I SING THE BAWDY LEG TRICK
Andy Tisbert
Crown Point, NY

THE GRIDDLE MASTER OF HED
Jim Collins
Raleigh, NC

BLOOK MUZAK
Michael Doherty
Ben Spergel
Sudbury, Ontario

HERD WIRED (Cyber-Cattle)
David J. Goodger
Hudson, Quebec

DUNE MEZUZAH
Vinnie Talerico
Little Falls, NJ

TARZAN OF THE ALPS
Forrest J. Ackerman
Hollywood, CA

THE SANDWICH HORROR
Jeffrey L. Koehn
Ontario, CA

ISAAC ASIMOV'S REBATE CITY
("C'mon down for the best positronic deals in town!")
Michael D. Toman
Torrance, CA

COMPETITION 46 (suggested by John Brunner)

The title of some SF stories can be regarded as the acronym of a phrase summarizing the plot. In theory this would save the time expended in reading them ... Examples:

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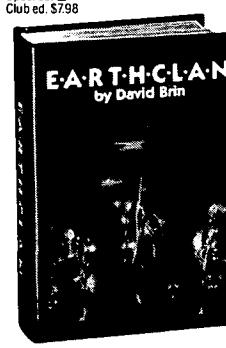

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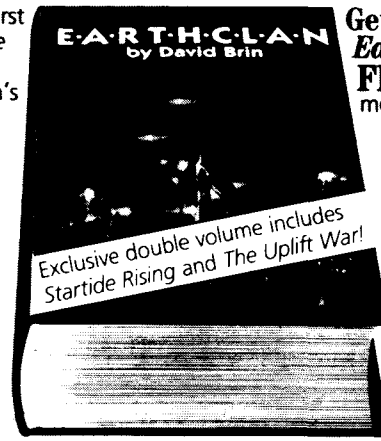

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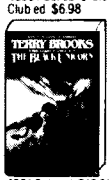

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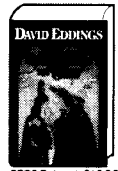

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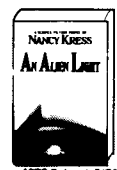

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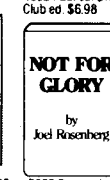

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